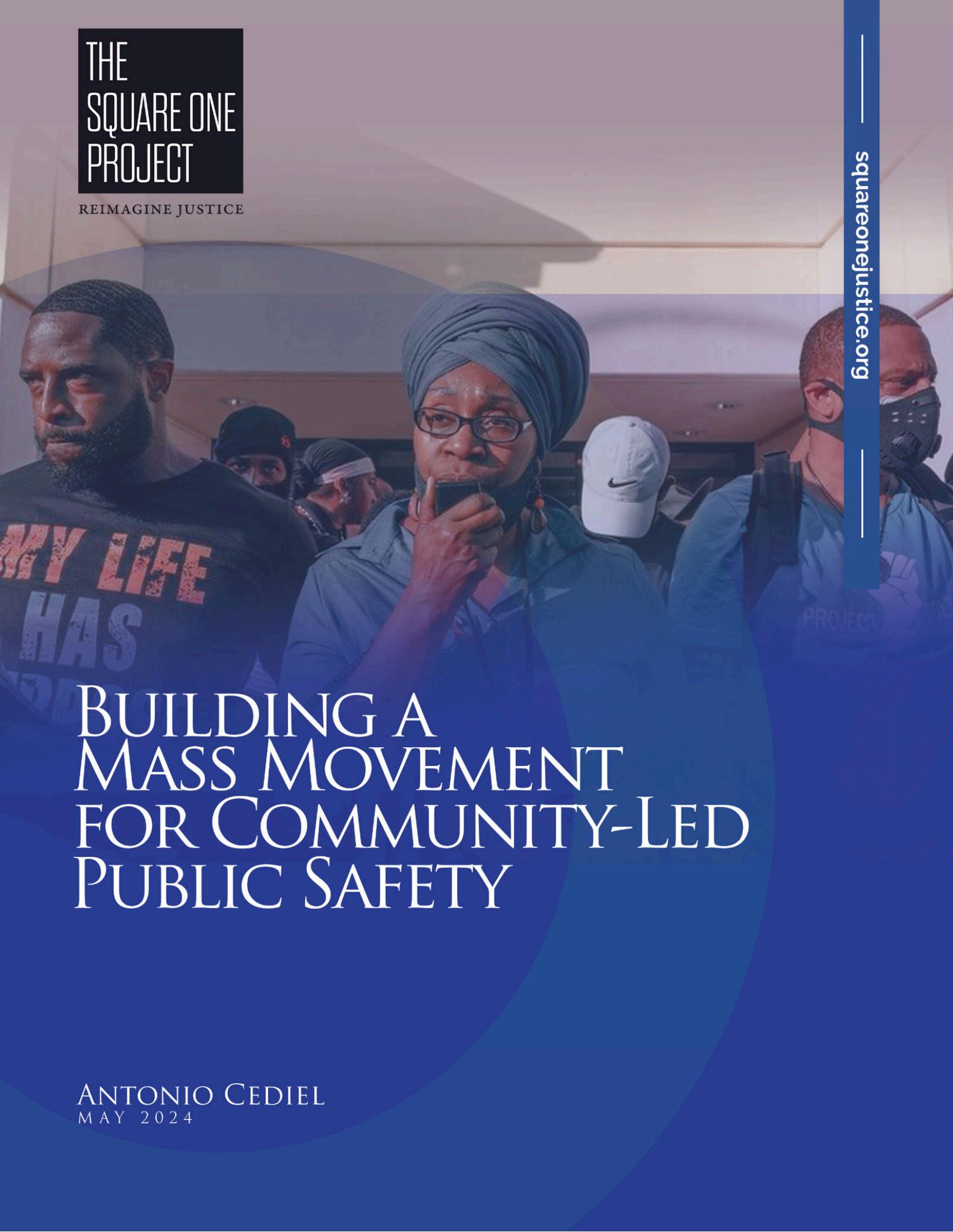


THE  
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REIMAGINE JUSTICE

squareonejustice.org



BUILDING A  
MASS MOVEMENT  
FOR COMMUNITY-LED  
PUBLIC SAFETY

ANTONIO CEDIEL  
MAY 2024

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**REIMAGINE JUSTICE**

The Square One Project is a multi-year narrative and culture change initiative focused on a foundational reevaluation of justice policy in this country – moving toward expanding opportunity, improving true public safety in local communities, and reducing reliance on punishment as a response to social problems that are often rooted in poverty, violence, and racial discrimination. Square One asks, if we set aside the traditional response to crime, and ask first whether other responses might be more effective – if we seek a new “square one” – how would criminal justice policy be different?

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

04		<b>Introduction</b>
05		<b>Political Context of CVI</b>
10		<b>A New Paradigm for Advocacy</b>
15		<b>Case Studies</b>
25		<b>Lessons from the Field</b>
29		<b>Building a Mass Movement</b>

# Introduction

Community violence intervention (CVI) is a term recently coined by the federal government in order to encapsulate a set of strategies that have been used for decades to address gun violence in major cities across the country. While various versions of CVI have been implemented successfully for years, lack of awareness and funding for this work have kept it at a relatively small scale. The Biden administration's recent promotion of CVI—egged on by years by grassroots advocacy—has accelerated public awareness and opened up new opportunities for scaling the work. However, how and if CVI can be sustained or dramatically expanded is far from certain.

While practitioners differ on the precise definitions of this work,<sup>1</sup> a central element of all major forms of CVI is based on a focused attention to the very small number of individuals in any given community that are at highest risk for shooting others or being shot. Rarely served by existing systems of public or private support (schools, social service agencies, community-based organizations), these individuals require tailored outreach and engagement. Virtually every version of CVI includes direct street outreach and some versions include direct engagement by hospital-based or law enforcement staff.<sup>2</sup> As the field has evolved, this has also included a widening range of wraparound services which—beyond interrupting imminent acts of violence—help ensure that potential shooters can gradually shift more permanently toward non-violent lifestyles. The most elaborate versions of this work include the development of full city and county-wide ecosystems that link a range of government and community-based services in coordinated efforts to prevent violence.<sup>3</sup>

While it may seem obvious that a targeted focus would be necessary, historically, the vast majority of public and private funding categorized as “violence prevention” has gone to lower-risk individuals who are typically easier to engage. Politically, there is little controversy involved in funding after-school or summer programs focused on things like the arts, sports, or jobs for youth. Individuals seen as “dangerous criminals,” however, are typically thought of as falling under the sole purview of law enforcement and many consider public investments in their well-being as futile or unmerited. Add to this the fact that both CVI workers and the residents most likely to benefit from CVI typically lack political clout, and we can begin to understand why it has been so challenging to drum up public support for this type of work.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. DOJ definition of CVI: “Community violence intervention (CVI) is an approach that uses evidence-informed strategies to reduce violence through tailored community-centered initiatives. These multidisciplinary strategies engage individuals and groups to prevent and disrupt cycles of violence and retaliation, and establish relationships between individuals and community assets to deliver services that save lives, address trauma, provide opportunity, and improve the physical, social, and economic conditions that drive violence.”

<sup>2</sup> While some consider any involvement of law enforcement (such as the use of focused deterrence) to be outside the bounds of CVI, for purposes of this paper, an initiative can still be defined as CVI if it includes as a central element the use of community-based outreach and services to program participants.

<sup>3</sup> Services usually include a range of mental health, workforce development, housing, and survivor services. An example of a widely developed ecosystem approach is New York City's Crisis Management System. For analysis of some of the staffing and funding necessary for a full CVI ecosystem, see <https://www.cviecosystem.org>

Due to the historical lack of investment in CVI, the field as a whole is still in early stages of development; even more embryonic, however, is the collective understanding of how to build the type of political support needed to ensure a true burgeoning of the field. Currently, virtually all funded advocacy work related to gun violence prevention is dedicated to gun control; and even the limited CVI advocacy dollars are mostly spent on gun-control-inspired models of state and federal advocacy which are sorely inadequate for ensuring successful CVI implementation.

For decades, the CDC has listed gun violence as the leading cause of death for young Black men and the second leading cause of death for young Latino men and Black women<sup>4</sup>; and even in states with the most restrictive gun policies, these populations continue to suffer deep losses. Thus, any serious strategy for solving the U.S. gun violence epidemic must center the needs of these communities and, as such, would require a fairly dramatic reorientation of the gun violence prevention advocacy landscape.

To this end, this report examines the political context of CVI advocacy, draws lessons from successful grassroots CVI organizing, and lays out a framework for how to build a mass movement for programs, initiatives, and full CVI ecosystems that can dramatically reduce gun violence over the long term. Ultimately, this report makes the case that only by building the political power of poor Black and Brown neighborhoods can we truly address one of the biggest health crises of our time.

## Political Context of CVI

For the last several decades, major advocacy related to gun violence prevention has centered almost exclusively on efforts to restrict the use and possession of firearms. And while different states have passed a number of gun control laws, federal legislation has been sparse. After the particularly horrific 2012 massacre of 26 people—including 20 five- and six-year-old children—in Newtown, CT., many gun control advocates hoped that mass public shock and outrage might turn the tide. In efforts to ramp up public support and maintain focus on the issue in the aftermath of the shooting, then-President Obama convened a Gun Violence Task Force charged with formulating a comprehensive list of recommendations to combat gun violence.

The result, after 22 task force meetings and input from over 200 organizations, was a long list of proposals which, in addition to background checks and an assault weapons ban, included a series of school safety measures, a gun safety campaign, investments in mental health, the confirmation of an ATF director, \$400 million for gun violence research, and a \$4 billion proposal

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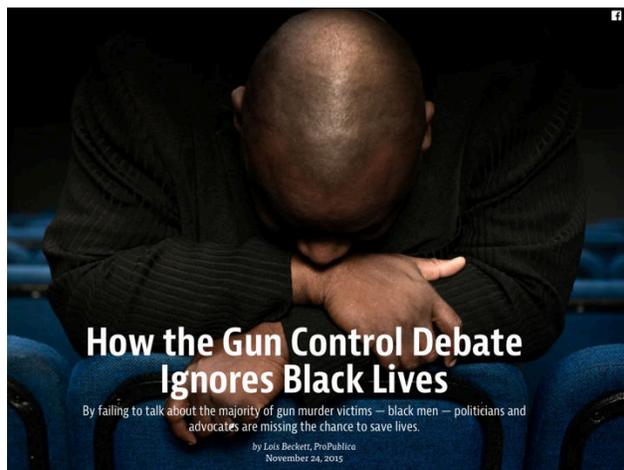
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<https://wisqars.cdc.gov/lcd/?o=LCD&y1=2020&y2=2020&ct=10&cc=ALL&g=00&s=1&r=2&ry=1&e=0&ar=lcd1age&at=groups&ag=lcd1age&a1=0&a2=199>

to fund 15,000 police officers. Ultimately, however, this package of recommendations died in Congress.

While the vast majority of reporting on gun violence advocacy was—and continues to be—focused on efforts to pass gun legislation at the state and federal levels, by the time of the Newtown shooting, researchers and reporters had begun documenting dramatic city-specific shooting reductions which did not seem to be the product of new laws.<sup>5</sup> For example, New York City and Boston garnered national attention for their plunging homicide rates during the 1990s: while the New York narrative focused on data-driven accountability for police and the “broken windows” approach to addressing low-level crimes, Boston’s focused deterrence policing strategy also included references to robust community partnerships. In 1998, Newsweek ran a cover story titled “God vs. Gangs” which depicted a Black pastor from Boston’s Ten Point Coalition, a clergy-led organization that partnered with law enforcement and various community-based organizations to reduce gun violence. Dubbed the “Boston Miracle” by reporters, the city’s Operation Ceasefire earned the Department of Justice’s highest rating for gun violence reduction.

Approaching the final year of the Obama presidency, a rare piece of reporting also focused on the fact that, in the midst of the failed political battles to pass gun control legislation, a small



A rare piece of journalism that dug into the lack of political attention to community-based solutions.

chorus of voices had been steadily advocating for scaling up initiatives similar to Boston’s. ProPublica’s extended piece entitled, “How the Gun Control Debate Ignores Black Lives” reported on the efforts of veterans of Boston’s strategy along with a new generation of Black pastors who were pushing for both local and federal funding to expand this work. A cadre of these pastors and violence intervention practitioners spent years of the Obama presidency lobbying White House officials, U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) officials, and members of Congress about the need to make major investments in these strategies.

Rev. Michael McBride, one of the lead pastors profiled in the article, was a member of both Obama’s Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships as well as his Gun Violence Prevention Task Force. He submitted a detailed proposal to allocate \$500 million over five years to scale up community-based interventions across the country, but despite the fact that McBride and other pastors were task force members, these strategies were not included among the task force’s final recommendations.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> While elements of what we now call CVI have been in existence for 40-50 years, lack of investment has precluded many models from being formally evaluated until the 2000s.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-the-gun-control-debate-ignores-black-lives>

The Trump years did not produce any new federal initiatives related to what would later be termed CVI: most messaging from the White House during that period focused on sending federal law enforcement officers to cities like Chicago in order to try to forcefully suppress violent crime. Meanwhile, only a handful of states provided CVI funding. The most notable was California which, since 2007, had been allocating \$9 million per year toward violence reduction efforts, first through its Gang Reduction Intervention and Prevention (CalGRIP) and then its Violence Intervention and Prevention (CalVIP) grant program and, in 2019, provided a one-time annual increase to \$30 million per year. While just a tiny allocation for addressing statewide gun violence (particularly in the country's most populous state), it was the country's largest statewide allocation at the time.

Lack of investment at the state and federal levels has meant that the vast majority of funds have had to come from local sources. But even in the best of circumstances, these investments have tended to be meager as well as vulnerable to rapidly shifting political winds. A memorable example is Chicago CeaseFire, a program which gained national notoriety through a 2012 documentary called "The Interrupters" which followed some of the city's violence interventionists as they worked to defuse violent street confrontations. Even as much of the country was introduced to this work for the first time through the film, and despite evaluations showing shooting reductions in the program's target neighborhoods, in 2013, the City of Chicago abruptly cut funding for the program—one of the largest programs in the country at the time. In this case, the city's police department was a major detractor of the program, citing the fact that 6 of the city's 300 violence interrupters had returned to criminal activity<sup>7</sup> (even as the same department has historically paid out tens of millions of dollars annually to settle misconduct lawsuits).<sup>8</sup>

This story is emblematic of how politically vulnerable CVI programs have been in cities throughout the country. A vulnerability due in no small part to the fact that the core CVI workforce—those providing street-level intervention—typically have similar backgrounds to the individuals they are trying to engage: Black and Latino men from impoverished neighborhoods with criminal records. While these characteristics help make street interventionists effective in engaging high-risk shooters, they are also what make them particularly vulnerable to being underpaid, under-resourced, and dismissed at will.

The demographics of this group of workers stands in stark contrast to other publicly-funded workforces that serve poor neighborhoods. For example, the large majority of teachers—even in low-income urban schools—are white middle-class women.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the majority of police officers are white men<sup>10</sup> who receive the type of salaries, benefits, and pensions that allow

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/chicago-drops-ceasefire-from-anti-violence-strategy/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://news.wttw.com/2024/01/22/repeated-police-misconduct-141-officers-cost-chicago-taxpayers-1428m-over-4-years#:~:text=In%20all%2C%20the%20city%20spent,according%20to%20WTTW%20News%27%20analysis.>

<sup>9</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/clr/public-school-teachers>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/09/23/us/bureau-justice-statistics-race.html>

them to live middle-class lifestyles—in most cases, outside of the urban centers they serve.<sup>11</sup>



CVI workers and organizers usually come from the communities they serve and are subject to low pay and fickle funding cycles.

Importantly, the salaries, working conditions, and basic funding thresholds of these groups are often protected by powerful unions and lobbying groups.

As a result, not only do teachers, police officers, firefighters, social workers, and medical professionals working in poor communities wield more power than CVI workers, they typically wield more power than the residents they are paid to serve. Low-income families of color typically have little or no control over the types of services they receive and, even in cases when

they've identified a service they want (like a team of unarmed civilian violence interventionists), they are usually easily rebuffed by public officials.

Historically, the main counter to these types of power imbalances has been in the form of grassroots organizing movements that have helped oppressed communities win certain rights or protections. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s holds a prominent place in the imaginations of most of the U.S. public, but there has been less awareness of the ways that organizers in the modern era work on a variety of everyday issues facing poor and oppressed people. While high-profile mass demonstrations occasionally crop up—the Rodney King uprising in 1992, the mass marches for immigrant rights in 2007, the Ferguson protests in 2014, and the largest mass demonstrations in U.S. history following the 2020 murder of George Floyd—the lion's share of community organizing occurs away from the media spotlight and reveals itself through less-splashy local policy wins.

When it comes to gun violence, in every major city, there are masses of latent foot soldiers that can be activated to help shift power in favor of humane and effective public safety systems. These community activists maintain a steady drumbeat of peace marches, vigils, stop-the-violence rallies, and desperate pleas for public resources; with little to no funding, they also often provide outreach, mentoring, recreational activities, and conflict resolution to youth in their neighborhoods. Meanwhile, with the exception of some Black-owned businesses, Black churches have historically been the only institutions completely owned and operated by Black people. Churches serve as centers of Black political power, often driving Black voter engagement, and wield influence over public officials in ways that individual Black residents typically cannot. Notwithstanding the fact that sectors of Black leadership have helped fuel the mass criminalization of Black neighborhoods in the past,<sup>12</sup> when faith leaders and street-level activists are able to collaborate, they can (and have) become potent political forces.

<sup>11</sup> <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/most-police-dont-live-in-the-cities-they-serve/>

<sup>12</sup> Forman, James. *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017.

## A New Paradigm for Advocacy

The current paradigm for gun violence advocacy is built around changing gun laws. This is largely due to the fact that the national gun violence debate typically comes into sharp focus after a high-profile mass shooting. And even though mass shootings<sup>13</sup> constitute less than 4% of gun homicides nationally,<sup>14</sup> almost the entirety of funded gun violence advocacy has been framed in terms of preventing these types of incidents. This is mainly because the most high-profile of these incidents typically occur in predominantly White, middle-class suburbs where the majority of journalists and policymakers can imagine themselves and their own families being victimized. Meanwhile, victims of daily violence (including mass shootings) in poor Black and Latino neighborhoods typically garner less sympathy: rather than being seen as innocent victims, they are often depicted as victims of poor choices and dangerous lifestyles.

A Black pastor in Florida who had lost family members to gun violence herself reflected on the differential treatment she observed when visiting with parents from the suburban mass shooting in Parkland, FL: “I quickly began noticing how differently that community was being treated than the way families in urban communities are treated after a tragedy. Comfort dogs were brought in, food from surrounding fast-food restaurants was brought in. In our neighborhood, a family could be murdered on the doorstep of a McDonald’s and they wouldn’t even be offered a Happy Meal.”<sup>15</sup>



Communities of color struggle to have their voices heard when it comes to gun violence policies or solutions.

The result is that policy prescriptions have almost exclusively centered around legislation aimed at restricting the possession and use of firearms (the most visible remedy for indiscriminate mass shootings), neglecting focused and humane strategies tailored to neighborhoods with highly predictable patterns and concentrations of violence. To date, regardless of whether they have been Democratic or Republican-led cities, the main policy prescription for the latter has usually been increased investments in law enforcement.

In just the last few years, several of the major gun control advocacy organizations have begun to recognize the value of CVI as at least a secondary priority for reducing shootings. They have hired increasing numbers of Black and Latino advocates and, in some cases, developed teams to

<sup>13</sup> The Gun Violence Archive defines a mass shooting as an incident in which four or more people are shot (either injured or killed). <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/explainer>

<sup>14</sup> In 2023, there were 704 mass shooting deaths out of 18,854 total gun homicides: <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting?year=2023>

<sup>15</sup> Rev. Rhonda Thomas, interview 2018.

focus on CVI policy. For the most part, however, while adding a CVI agenda has represented an evolution in these organizations' approach, it has mostly consisted of grafting CVI policy advocacy on top of the existing gun control advocacy infrastructure—an infrastructure mainly consisting of legislative policy experts, lobbyists, and communications specialists based in federal and state capitals.

Within the first month of the Biden administration, tensions erupted between Black and Latino advocates and members of White-led advocacy groups after the White House scheduled an exclusive meeting with gun control organizations in order to discuss policy priorities (including CVI policy). Black and Latino advocates quickly communicated their exasperation to administration officials that White-led groups were being allowed to negotiate the terms of a policy agenda on their behalf, and pushed for their own meeting. In short order, the group met with Susan Rice, Biden's Domestic Policy Director, and negotiated a proposal in which the administration agreed to push for \$5.36 billion over eight years for CVI—a significant increase from Biden's original \$900 million proposal.

While Black and Latino CVI practitioners and advocates have not traditionally had a permanent presence in the capital, what this occasion reinforced was that they had a much stronger sense of urgency and were much better qualified to advocate on their own behalf. In order to build pressure and support for the proposal, the Black Brown Peace Consortium<sup>16</sup> launched a "Fund Peace" campaign which supported congressional advocacy, provided a steady stream of messaging to the press, maintained direct engagement with grassroots CVI practitioners and organizers, and hosted local events pushing local governments to use federal funds for CVI. While the \$5.36 billion narrowly missed passage by one Senate vote as part of Biden's Build Back Better bill, advocates succeeded in getting American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds eligible to be used for CVI by state and local governments. The following year, Congress passed the Safer Communities Act which included \$250 million in federal grants for CVI.



Alabama pastors pushed for local ARPA funds to be used for CVI. Shots rang out in the background during this TV interview.

Despite the fact that \$250 million was less than 5% of what advocates were requesting, the White House, Congress, and members of the press accurately claimed that this represented the largest-ever federal investment in CVI. What has been largely missing from the national dialogue, however, is that even with these investments, **the most consequential advocacy will still need to occur at the local level.** This is true for several reasons.

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<sup>16</sup> The [Black Brown Peace Consortium](#) is a coalition of CVI practitioners, trainers, researchers, and advocates which formed in 2018 in order to push for high quality CVI efforts across the country and shift national narratives related to gun violence and public health.

- 1. For the foreseeable future, state and federal funding levels will continue to be entirely inadequate to run credible CVI efforts.** ARPA funds—currently the lion’s share of federal funding for CVI—have to be obligated by the end of 2024 and will soon run out. Meanwhile, current state and federal CVI grant programs, while helpful, fall far short of the funding necessary to build or sustain high-quality initiatives. So far, the largest federal grants have ranged from \$1.5 and \$2 million over three years per CVI site which means that federal funding can only provide *supplemental* support rather than pay for core programming. Even in states like California and Illinois that made major investments in CVI in 2021 (each invested approximately \$200 million), funds have been distributed in relatively small grants: California has awarded the largest—up to \$2 million per year—while Illinois grants have been around \$300,000 per year. To put this into perspective, a mid-size city of 300,000 people should be spending *at least* \$9 million per year to run a credible initiative. This number is based on the cost per participant served in successful CVI programs multiplied by the minimum estimated number of potential shooters in a city. Using these same assumptions, total CVI funding in the 50 cities with the highest homicide rates would be at least \$8 billion per year (an amount far beyond what the federal government has even contemplated spending to date).<sup>17</sup>
- 2. Even with adequate investment, CVI funds are unlikely to be spent effectively without a combination of community expertise and accountability.** In addition to the fact that city and county governments have often had to be pressured by community leaders to seek or allocate funds for CVI (even with the availability of ARPA funds), their initial attempts to launch CVI initiatives are often plagued by missteps, false starts, and in some cases, destructive practices. In those cases, community organizers and activists have often been the critical force in helping to correct flawed implementation and ensure effective use of public funds.

Detroit, for example, has long maintained some of the highest homicide rates in the country, despite its long-standing Ceasefire program. The program has had a perplexingly low annual budget of under \$1 million along with a much-criticized street outreach program that has been run out of the police department. For years, activists complained that the program was overly-law enforcement heavy and ineffective and, in 2023, the National Institute of Justice confirmed this with an evaluation indicating “no statistically significant differences” in shooting victimization among



Detroit organizers launched their own community-led CVI program.

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<sup>17</sup> The 50 highest homicide-rate cities in 2022 have a total population of approximately 27 million. Effective CVI programs nationally typically spend at least \$30,000 per program participant. Assuming that each city’s CVI effort engages just 0.1% of the population, there would be 270,000 participants which would cost about \$8.1B.

15-to-34-year-olds and, overall, giving the program a “no effects” rating.<sup>18</sup>

In the meantime, organizers spent years pushing the city to develop a CVI initiative in partnership with grassroots leaders.<sup>19</sup> In 2023, a local coalition successfully pushed the city to make a two-year \$10 million investment in community-based CVI programs in six of the city’s most violent neighborhoods (though falling far short of the coalition’s call for \$150 million over five years, it was an historic investment).<sup>20</sup> As part of the initiative, Force Detroit, one of the lead members of the coalition, was given ownership over one of the neighborhoods in order to implement their own CVI effort and, even with limited resources, has achieved dramatic early results.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Local organizing movements can pivot to address multiple issues facing low-income communities impacted by violence.

Impacted communities can pair their advocacy for CVI with criminal justice, policing, and other reform agendas in ways that can help keep them safe from both community and governmental violence. Without exception, the communities most impacted by community gun violence are the most impacted by police violence as well as the most pernicious manifestations of the criminal legal system. For many neighborhood residents and activists, all of these issues are part of an integrated set of daily threats. As will be demonstrated in the case studies below, a strong and organized community base can force changes on a number of fronts simultaneously and help ensure that CVI investments are not camouflaging other public initiatives that are compromising their safety. In the best of scenarios, community leaders will have a permanent seat at the table in helping to shape all of the major public safety initiatives that affect them.<sup>22</sup>



Organizers working to stop community violence can pivot to police violence and other public safety concerns.

<sup>18</sup> <https://wdet.org/2023/02/08/justice-department-gives-detroit-crime-reduction-programs-no-effects-ratings/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://livefree.forcedetroit.org>

<sup>20</sup> <https://forcedetroit.org/build-peace-report-2/>

<sup>21</sup> The City of Detroit reported a 70% quarterly reduction in fatal and nonfatal shootings in Force Detroit’s target neighborhood in comparison to the same quarter of the previous year (as opposed to a 37% reduction in non-CVI areas of the city).

<https://detroitmi.gov/news/new-data-show-violent-crime-fell-50-70-areas-served-2-detroits-shotstoppers-groups>

<sup>22</sup> To help with this, Live Free USA has commissioned a number of city-specific reports that calculate the real taxpayer costs associated with gun violence. These reveal that a single fatal or nonfatal shooting will often cost taxpayers around \$1 million. <https://costofviolence.org>

## HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO FUND PEACE?

Most CVI practitioners have been working with scraps of funding for so long that few have dared calculate what it would truly cost to fully fund a CVI effort. The simplest way to estimate costs is to multiply the total number of high-risk shooters in a city and multiply that by the estimated program cost per participant.

A number of programs associated with evaluated violence reductions have been spending approximately \$30,000 per program participant per year. What is included in these programs ranges somewhat, but most include elements of street intervention, mental health services, and workforce development.

In order to estimate the number of high-risk shooters, some of the best data comes from city-specific violence problem analyses. On the low end, the California Partnership for Safe Communities estimated that just 400 individuals (0.1% of the population) were at high risk for shooting in Oakland; at the higher end, Chicago CRED estimates that there are 21,000 individuals (just under 0.8% of the population) at high risk for shooting in Chicago. Percentages will vary by city, but taking even the most conservative estimate of 0.1%, it is possible to estimate the *minimum* funding threshold a city would require.

### Sample calculation for the city of Montgomery, AL:



$$200,586 \times 0.001 = \mathbf{200 \text{ individuals}}$$
$$200 \text{ individuals} \times \$30,000 = \mathbf{\$6,000,000}$$



Cities that are interested in constructing a full “CVI ecosystem” (with hospital-linked services, emergency housing support, victim advocates, etc.) will need to spend more. In the case of Montgomery, this could be **\$10,600,000**.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.cviecosystem.org>

# Case Studies

The case studies below describe the ways in which community organizing has helped shift local power and drive humane and effective public safety for communities traditionally victimized by the criminal legal system. By building community strength, holding local officials accountable, and having real influence over how both violence reduction and policing practices are shaped, poor Black and Brown communities can help ensure that CVI is actually living up to its promise. The following examples demonstrate organizing at early, middle, and long-term stages of development. By the end of 2023, Birmingham, Alabama had succeeded in establishing the first stage of CVI implementation; in Indianapolis, IN, implementation had reached more advanced levels resulting in early shooting reductions; and in the case of Oakland, CA, an 11-year trajectory reveals both the hope and challenges of sustaining long-term violence reductions.



While CVI initiatives have been implemented for years in Chicago and multiple cities on the East and West Coasts, the CVI infrastructure in Southern states has remained relatively undeveloped. Lack of public or private investment have left the region with some of the worst public safety environments in the country. Birmingham, for example, has had one of the highest homicide rates for years, often hovering at around 50 homicides per 100,000 residents (about ten times the national rate), and like most cities, has made failed attempts to get the violence under control.

In 2015, Birmingham launched an initiative modeled on Boston’s Ceasefire model.<sup>24</sup> Consultants from the National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College, however, determined early on that the initiative was plagued by a number of implementation shortcomings and, at the same time, community activists complained that the approach included abusive police tactics.<sup>25</sup> After two years, the initiative fizzled.

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<sup>24</sup> Focused deterrence is a central component of Ceasefire strategies in which a combination of law enforcement and community members communicate directly with individuals at highest risk for gun violence. Messaging includes offers of a range of support services for those who want to escape patterns of violence as well as promises of targeted law enforcement action for those who do not. Though the strategy has received a number of positive evaluations for helping to reduce shootings, it has also garnered extensive criticism from community members and activists who reject the policing component.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.al.com/news/2023/08/how-violence-prevention-initiatives-have-evolved-in-birmingham.html>

In 2017, a new mayor took office and reframed the violence problem as requiring a broader community-wide approach.<sup>26</sup> By then, however, Black faith leaders and organizers had already begun mobilizing in an effort to institute a new set of community-driven approaches. Faith in Action Alabama (FIAA), a statewide community organizing network, had been receiving training and coaching from organizers in Oakland and other cities where community engagement had been pivotal in successful CVI implementation.

In order to begin building momentum, volunteer FIAA organizers started building a core team of about 15 community leaders and began educating them about proven strategies that had worked elsewhere. The Birmingham Peacemakers, a clergy-led group began engaging in community night walks—an organizing tactic learned from Oakland clergy (who in turn learned it from pastors in Boston) which helped build a base of dedicated leaders. During these walks, faith leaders and community members walked some of the more violent neighborhoods in Birmingham at night in order to engage with residents and start learning more about the particular needs of those most directly impacted by violence. Though many of the clergy and organizers were directly impacted themselves, the walks helped them more intimately understand specific neighborhood needs as well as provide opportunities for other community leaders less-directly connected to the streets to engage with residents.

Onoyemi Williams, who had herself lost a family member to gun violence, worked full-time as an insurance analyst while serving, on a volunteer basis, as a lead organizer for FIAA. She and



Hundreds of Birmingham residents turned out to push for public investments in CVI.

others began expanding their outreach to more members of the community, conducting one-on-one relational meetings, convening group informational meetings, and expanding participation in the night walks. As the group grew, volunteers began conducting what organizers refer to as “research actions” with officials from the mayor’s office and city council. These were small-group meetings in which residents shared concerns about the gun violence

problem, shared what they’d been learning

about CVI, and listened to the positions and perspectives of the officials. According to Williams, responses from city officials were mostly lukewarm and non-committal. They were “typical politician meetings...it was, oh, send us your plan, we’ll take a look at it. Thank you for coming.” The tactic was to “give you just enough hope that you’d made an impact without really committing to anything.”<sup>27</sup>

When the team wasn’t getting any concrete interest, they began planning their first big public action to draw attention to the issue. In 2018, the volunteer team of FIAA organizers started

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.al.com/news/birmingham/2019/05/heres-how-birmingham-is-battling-its-high-homicide-rate.html>

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Onoyemi Williams,

planning a major event at a concert arena in the city. They made flyers, knocked on doors, and pastors activated their congregations. The mayor was also invited, but FIAA made it clear to his office that this would not be a co-sponsored event: while the mayor would have the opportunity to address the public about gun violence, FIAA was setting the agenda. With a few hundred people in the crowd, the mayor shared his own personal experiences with gun violence and concluded his remarks by saying, “I look forward to co-leading with Faith in Action to give you peace.”<sup>28</sup> At that point, the organizers were asking for a commitment of \$1.5 million per year for five years in order to begin funding a CVI program in the city. However, despite the fact that this amount was far short of the approximately \$6 - 11 million per year that a city the size of Birmingham should be spending, and despite the mayor’s public commitment of partnership, no funding pledges were forthcoming.

Organizers continued to work and began bringing in national CVI experts from Live Free and Advance Peace in order to help educate the community and public officials.<sup>29</sup> They also expanded their circle with a number of new partners, including the local Moms Demand Action chapter and leaders from the county public health department and the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Hospital. Some, including the county’s Chief Medical Officer and the County Sheriff (out of uniform), even attended the community night walks, helping to further bridge divides between public officials and residents.

By 2020, the core team expanded and ultimately evolved into a more formalized community roundtable that began meeting regularly to plan, propose solutions, and continue engaging a wider range of partners. With 20-25 weekly attendees, the group attracted a large number of health professionals including members of the hospital’s trauma team, the critical care nursing team, the chief medical officer, epidemiologists, and mental health experts. This was balanced by leaders from community-based organizations working with youth, as well as clergy, organizers, and residents from impacted neighborhoods. Although no major investments had yet to be announced by the city itself, representatives from the mayor’s office and city council joined as well.

According to Onoyemi Williams, the community roundtable served multiple purposes. Not only did it provide a consistent forum for key stakeholders to plan, discuss, and propose new ideas, it also provided an element of transparency to the different ideas being negotiated. Proposals from the city that did not adhere to the ideas the team was generating could be openly rejected without the risk of different factions jockeying for contracts or being accused of obstructionism. And because the roundtable was not owned or controlled by the city, the group could set its own agenda based on its own research and best thinking.

Given the high levels of interest from the city and county’s health community, the team focused on the creation of a hospital-linked intervention program (HVIP). Live Free staff then introduced

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.wbrc.com/story/38496921/bham-city-religious-leaders-partner-together-to-end-gun-violence/>

<sup>29</sup> Live Free USA trains and coaches CVI organizers and provides technical assistance to CVI practitioners. Advance Peace trains and coaches practitioners on the successful CVI model developed in Richmond, CA.

the team to colleagues from the Health Alliance for Violence Intervention who could provide technical assistance to the team in the creation of the new program and, by 2021, the Jefferson County Health Department pledged an initial \$2 million over three years for the project. Following the group's lead, the city then pledged an additional \$2 million in ARPA funds to support the effort. The health department later expanded its commitment, pledging \$1.1 million per year in perpetuity, pending the program's success.

In February 2022, the HVIP launched and, as of this writing, the UAB is in the process of analyzing data from the first year of implementation. Meanwhile, the community roundtable has begun conducting an intensive asset mapping process in order to identify key community needs as well as gaps in services among the city's most vulnerable neighborhoods. The product of this work will be to recommend targeted future investments including a broader set of violence intervention strategies—such as street interventionists and key wraparound services—in order to build an increasingly robust ecosystem of gun violence prevention and intervention.



Back in 1999, Indianapolis had also implemented its own version of the Boston Ceasefire strategy and, in their case, achieved a 34% reduction in homicides over two years.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, as in most cities, the success was short-lived: across the country, political infighting, changing city leaders, and a variety of community dynamics frequently unravel the type of delicate coordination that is required in order to maintain a successful violence reduction effort. And while shootings in Indianapolis continued to rise and fall over the years, by 2013, homicides rose sharply—jumping by a third from the year before—and then rose steadily over the next seven years.

In 2015, Faith in Indiana (FIN), a statewide organization dedicated to grassroots community organizing, launched a campaign to get the City of Indianapolis to invest in an effective CVI strategy. Similar to organizers in Alabama, the first step of FIN organizers was to build a core team of grassroots leaders to drive their movement. Organizers conducted 15-20 one-to-one conversations per week with individuals directly impacted by violence, policing, and incarceration in order to build a network of leaders who could push for the types of policies, practices, and investments that would make their neighborhoods safe. These leaders then

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<sup>30</sup> <https://crimesolutions.ojp.gov/ratedprograms/65#2-0>

began meeting with public officials in order to cultivate working relationships with them and share what they were learning about violence intervention.<sup>31</sup>

Educating the city about proven violence intervention strategies was an ongoing process. Organizers repeatedly brought in seasoned practitioners and advocates from other cities to speak with city and community leaders about lessons learned and about how to ensure both community accountability and support for such an initiative. Additionally, FIN organized a trip for the mayor's staff and other leaders to visit Oakland and Los Angeles in order to see effective violence intervention sites, hear from experts, and engage in dialogue with their peers in city government.

While organizers and clergy spent time building productive working relationships with city officials and providing them with opportunities to learn about the work, they were clear that their recommendations could easily fall on deaf ears if city officials were not aware that there was an army of supporters behind them. As FIN organizer, Rev. Juard Barnes, said, "We brought so much power to the table that the mayor's office had to listen to us."

By 2018, three years into the campaign, Indianapolis finally launched a pilot violence reduction program. As is the case with many cities, however, the initial version ended up being a mish-mash of various measures that did not add up to a coherent strategy: they ran gun buy-backs (which are not supported by research), created summer activities for youth (even though the vast majority of shootings are committed by adults), and gave small grants to various community organizations (too small to make real impact). In all, the city was spending less than \$1 million per year on violence reduction and, unsurprisingly, the effort did not yield results.

While the city had gotten the message that there needed to be some level of community engagement in addressing violence, organizers were clear that these measures were inadequate and that there would need to be more community accountability in order to ensure quality implementation. In 2019, FIN organized a public action with more than 300 people in attendance where community leaders called on the mayor to hire a reputable technical assistance provider and ensure the city was using nationally-recognized best practices. Given local interest in doing a version of Ceasefire, colleagues from Oakland advised FIN that they would need a provider that understood the importance of robust community engagement and wraparound services and connected them with the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR).<sup>32</sup> While generating mounting pressure, FIN helped secure a city contract for NICJR and then identified over 90 community organizations to help inform NICJR's assessment of the city's violence reduction efforts. In 2020, NICJR released a report with a set of

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<sup>31</sup> Much of this case study is taken from Faith in Indiana's 2022 report: "Indianapolis: An Unlikely Case Study in Co-Governance."

<https://livefreeusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/faithinindiana-co-governance-case-study-report-digital.pdf>

<sup>32</sup>

<https://www.philanthropy.com/article/black-faith-groups-have-been-fighting-neighborhood-gun-violence-for-decades-they-finally-getting-support>

recommendations for overhauling the city’s initiative which had not been demonstrating results.



Community and faith leaders in Indianapolis built a broad coalition of CVI and police reform advocates.

At the same time, the same base of clergy and directly-impacted leaders that had been working on community violence had also begun to work on issues of *police* violence. In May 2020, Indianapolis police had killed two young Black men in separate incidents which prompted protests in the streets. Clergy had already begun planning a public action to put additional pressure on the mayor to address police accountability when the murder of George Floyd sparked mass action. FIN organizer, Rosie Bryant, met with church leaders and planned a faith procession with 30 of the most prominent Black

clergy who led a march of 1,500 people. Demonstrators called on the mayor to take action on a list of demands which included a new police use of force policy, several police training and accountability measures, and full adoption of NICJR’s recommendations for overhauling the city’s violence reduction efforts. Over 1,000 people also emailed the mayor’s office urging him to deliver on the demands.

When the mayor initially refused to meet with the demonstrators, FIN conveyed that they would be holding a press conference later that week to make their demands public. The mayor then dispatched his aides to begin meeting with FIN leaders to negotiate city commitments and, a couple days later, publicly committed to meeting FIN’s demands and named FIN as a partner in these efforts.<sup>33</sup> The mayor also released a public statement acknowledging this partnership:

I have met with Faith in Indiana for many years, and they have been invaluable partners in pushing our administration to make meaningful change for the betterment of police-community relationships and in furtherance of peace on our streets. That is why I am thankful that their recent engagement has led to our commitment that in the budget I intend to submit this August, our office will propose additional funding for the expansion of our Group Violence Intervention strategy. This funding will bring additional staff and resources to bear in an effort to interrupt the cycle of hopelessness and violence that has gripped far too many of our young people.<sup>34</sup>

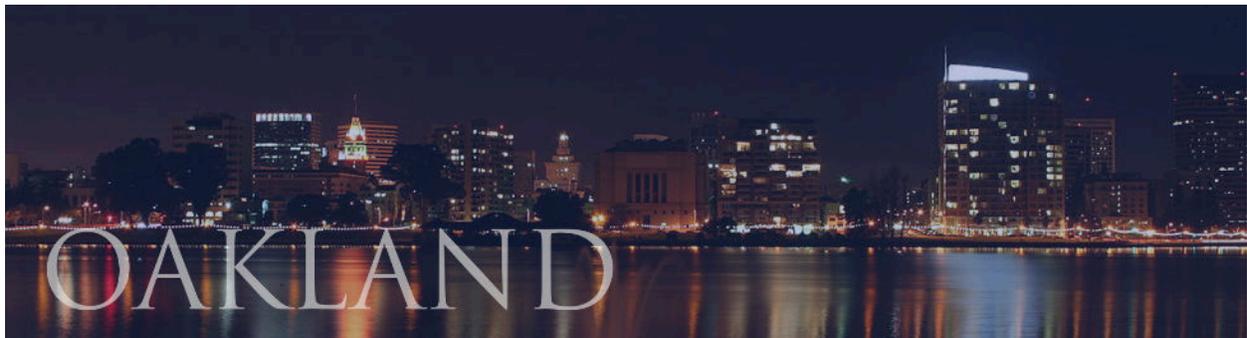
This organizing victory also laid the groundwork for further progress in the city. As FIN continued to work on ensuring that the violence intervention strategy was effectively implemented, it continued to press further in terms of police reform. What had been clear for

<sup>33</sup> <https://fox59.com/news/faith-in-indiana-calls-on-mayor-hogsett-to-support-policing-reforms/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://livefreeusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/faithinindiana-co-governance-case-study-report-digital.pdf>

many years to over-policed communities in Indianapolis was that the city’s police oversight board—with all three members being appointed by the police themselves—provided no real accountability to the public. Building upon their existing organizing momentum, FIN leaders got the city council to expand the police oversight board from 3 to 7 members with a 4-member non-police appointed majority.

Soon after, in 2021, the American Rescue Plan was passed in Congress which allocated \$232 million to Indianapolis for COVID relief. FIN organizers pushed for a significant percentage to be allocated to gun violence reduction in order to supplement existing investments. In the end, the city dedicated \$115 million additional funds over three years to anti-violence work: this represented about half of the city’s total ARPA allocation and was likely the highest percentage allocated by any city to violence prevention. \$37 million of this was for CVI expansion (boosting the street team to 50 outreach workers and providing for city staff specifically dedicated to the initiative); \$45 million for anti-violence community grants; and \$30 million for mental health programming.<sup>35</sup> In the wake of these investments and with adherence to NICJR’s recommended changes to the strategy, the city saw shooting reductions in both 2022 and 2023. By the end of 2023, the city reported a 31% reduction in homicides and a 20% reduction in nonfatal shootings over the previous two years.<sup>36</sup>



As in most cities, Oakland began its road to an effective CVI initiative with a series of false starts. In 2005, the city took the unique step of passing a local ballot measure to provide dedicated taxpayer funding for public safety which would include investments in community policing and youth services. Despite broad support for the measure, the city never met its targets in relation to the hiring of officers dedicated to community policing and the investments in youth programming proved demographically flawed given that the large majority of shootings in Oakland—as well as throughout the country—were (and are) committed by adults.<sup>37</sup>

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<https://tribune.com/faith-in-indiana-celebrates-major-victory-indianapolis-mayor-announces-115-million-commitment-to-reduce-gun-violence/>

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<https://www.wrtv.com/news/local-news/city-of-indianapolis-credits-violence-reduction-strategy-to-falling-crime-rates#:~:text=In%20a%20press%20release%20sent,aggravated%20assaults%20fell%20by%206.5%25.>

<sup>37</sup> Much of this Oakland case study is based on the 2019 report: “A Case Study in Hope: Lessons from Oakland’s Remarkable Reduction in Gun Violence”

<https://policingequity.org/images/pdfs-doc/reports/A-Case-Study-in-Hope.pdf>

By 2006, homicides had hit a 10-year peak and interest grew in proven strategies from other parts of the country. In 2007, the city began moving toward an approach modeled on Boston's Operation Ceasefire. The initiative was launched in 2009, but the strategy was hampered by poor implementation including a lack of proper funding and inadequate management structures and, by 2011, the effort had largely stalled.

By 2012, Oakland had a new mayor who, though skeptical of the Ceasefire strategy, was compelled by a growing coalition in support of it. The year prior, Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), a local community organizing network, had begun a grassroots campaign to press for a revamped version of Ceasefire—a version that would go beyond focused deterrence by providing robust community-based services for program participants and that would be shaped and driven by community leaders. Rev. Michael McBride—the same pastor who would later advocate for federal investments in CVI at the White House—was a leading voice in galvanizing the community. Similar to what organizers later did in Birmingham and Indianapolis, McBride and other Oakland organizers conducted countless one-to-one meetings, public presentations, and community actions to build community interest and accountability. In the words of one of the key organizers, “the idea was to create a citywide climate that was overwhelmingly receptive to the strategy so that when the right political moment came, a groundswell of community support would already be in place.”<sup>38</sup> At one point, OCO mobilized hundreds of community members and shut down a city council meeting to demand that a fully-funded and effective version of Ceasefire be implemented.

By April of that year, the City Council's Public Safety Committee, the police chief, and the mayor's senior policy advisor for public safety all publicly acknowledged that Oakland's past efforts to implement Ceasefire had been inadequate, and promised a new better-funded version with a full range of services for participants. Several months later, OCO organized a public event at one of the city's largest Black churches with several hundred people in attendance. There, with news cameras rolling, the mayor, police chief, district attorney, county probation chief, and other city and community leaders pledged to fully support the strategy.

By the end of 2012, Oakland Ceasefire was relaunched not only with significant community support, but with the active participation of community leaders. Among other structures in place, the initiative included a community working group made up of city, law enforcement, faith, community, and social service agency leaders who met regularly to analyze relevant data, examine progress, and recommend needed adjustments to the strategy. Additionally, the city contracted with the California Partnership for Safe Communities to provide technical assistance, hired a full-time project manager, and funded a rigorous problem analysis which, through the collection of raw data and interviews, would provide an in-depth assessment of the violence problem in Oakland. This study ultimately helped correct a number of false narratives that had skewed Oakland's prior violence prevention efforts. For example, there had been a widespread notion that drug-related disputes were fueling much of the city's violence. Additionally, the

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<sup>38</sup> <https://policingequity.org/gun-violence/34-cpe-case-study-gun-violence-reduction-oakland/file>

police department had estimated that 4-5% of the city's population—as many as 20,000 people—were driving gun violence in the city.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, Oakland's problem analysis revealed that the core problem was actually much more limited: rather than there being thousands of active shooters, there were approximately 50 violent groups or gangs with an active membership of between 1,000 and 1,200 people, and even among this smaller group, the report concluded that only around 400 individuals—or 0.1% of the city's population—were responsible for the majority of the city's shootings. The analysis also revealed that, despite public perceptions, the large majority of the shootings were being committed by adults.<sup>40</sup> This data helped inform a much more targeted and manageable approach to the strategy.

One result of this was that, when an updated version of the public safety ballot measure came up for a vote, the new version placed more focus on older individuals. During this period, organizers helped galvanize widespread community support for the measure which passed in 2014 with 77% of the vote. The measure provided an estimated \$277 million over the next 10 years to help reduce violence, 40% of which would be allocated toward targeted interventions and services for those at highest risk for violence. In combination with regular city funds, this boosted the Oakland Ceasefire annual budget to approximately \$14 million which included funding for street outreach, case management, life coaching, mental health services, job preparation, emergency housing, hospital-linked interventions, and stipends for program participants. Based on the city's more recent analysis that approximately 400 individuals were responsible for the majority of the shootings, \$14 million was likely the right level of investment for a basic implementation of the strategy, though a full CVI ecosystem might require something closer to \$36 million.<sup>41</sup>

While all of this was occurring, community organizers in Oakland also focused on the issue of abusive policing in the city. Particularly since Ceasefire's focused deterrence component included the involvement of law enforcement, it was particularly important that Oakland police could be counted on as credible partners in the work. Given the long history of police abuse in the city, this would be no easy task. Oakland, after all, was the birthplace of the Black Panthers for Self Defense which was founded in response to Oakland police abuse. And, in 2000, the "Riders" police scandal revealed widespread police abuse and corruption, prompting a lawsuit and a federal court monitor charged with evaluating the department's progress in adhering to dozens of mandated reforms.

In 2014, community pressure helped prompt the department to commit to procedural justice training for all sworn and non-sworn personnel and eventually made it mandatory training for all police academy students. These trainings included the history of police abuse in Oakland and focused on the ideas and practices embedded in ensuring residents' rights and dignity were not

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<sup>39</sup> P. 36: <https://policingequity.org/images/pdfs-doc/reports/A-Case-Study-in-Hope.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> P. 38: <https://policingequity.org/images/pdfs-doc/reports/A-Case-Study-in-Hope.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.cviecosystem.org/cities/oakland-california>

abused during the course of daily policing. For the first time ever, civilian instructors were made part of the academy training, including one of the city's lead organizers and activists, Rev. Ben McBride.

During the almost two years that it took to complete the initial round of training for the city's 1,100 officers, there was not a single officer-involved shooting in Oakland. In addition, between 2012 and 2017, use-of-force incidents dropped by 75% and legal claims of officer misconduct dropped by 74%. In addition, the homicide clearance rate increased dramatically from 29% to over 70% between 2011 and 2017.<sup>42</sup>

The deputy police chief at the time, a life-long Oakland resident, commented that the improved police-community relationships were a major reason for this progress: "More witnesses are coming forward. People are now providing video evidence, where they didn't used to do that even when they had it. That happens when you are seen as a professional department."<sup>43</sup> Even despite these measures of progress, however, there were big setbacks during these years. In 2016, a huge scandal erupted when it was revealed that Oakland officers had been trafficking a minor for sex: ultimately, a dozen Oakland officers were either fired or disciplined for sexual assault or failure to report the incidents.<sup>44</sup> Street protests followed including the shutting down of a major freeway running through the city.

Between the launch of Ceasefire in late 2012 and 2019, Oakland had gone through two different mayors and seven police chiefs. In spite of the ongoing police abuse scandals, the inability of the department to meet all the requirements of their federal monitoring, and the jarring instability of police leadership, organizers and community leaders were able to maintain their coalition of support and accountability for Ceasefire. During this same period, the city had six straight years of reductions in combined fatal and nonfatal shootings, ultimately cutting homicides in half and achieving the city's second lowest homicide rate in 47 years.

In 2019, however, there was a slight uptick in shootings and, as in most of the country, 2020 began a marked increase in violence which coincided with the COVID pandemic. Surprising to both city and community leaders, however, was that by 2023, shootings had not begun to decrease as had occurred in much of the rest of the country: in fact, with 126 homicides in 2023, the city had essentially returned to the homicide rate preceding the launch of Oakland Ceasefire. The city's newly-elected mayor took office and commissioned a rigorous program audit of Ceasefire in order to determine why shootings had been increasing over the last several years. The audit report, released in January 2024, revealed that, beginning in 2019, the city had quietly begun to water down key components of the program including stripping away staff and resources from the initiative, abandoning critical management practices, and shifting its focus to geographical areas in the city rather than on specific individuals at highest risk for violence.

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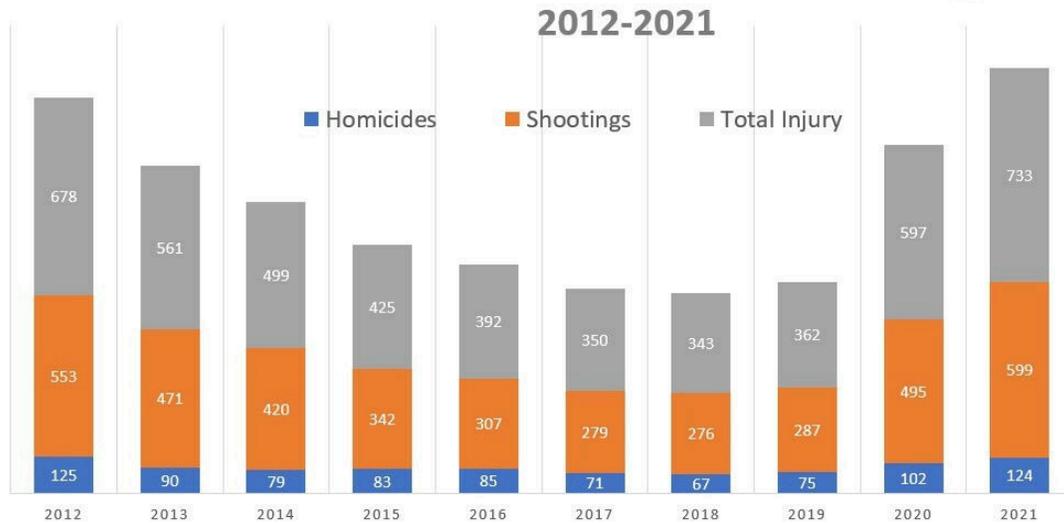
<sup>42</sup> P. 57: <https://policingequity.org/images/pdfs-doc/reports/A-Case-Study-in-Hope.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> <https://policingequity.org/images/pdfs-doc/reports/A-Case-Study-in-Hope.pdf>

<sup>44</sup>

<https://www.kqed.org/news/11757557/oakland-releases-heavily-redacted-records-that-shed-light-raise-questions-on-sex-abuse-case>

## Oakland Homicides and Shootings



Shootings in Oakland had a consistent 6-year decline, but then started to rise again when key community leaders began to shift focus. By 2021, even the police chief was lamenting the lack of community accountability for Oakland Ceasefire.

Importantly, this period also coincided with a watering down of the community organizing components of this work. Many of the key community leaders who had originally helped build public support and accountability for the program were no longer centrally involved: some had shifted focus to statewide or national campaigns and others had moved on to other local issues. By 2021, even the police chief at the time lamented the loosening of community accountability, commenting that “things aren’t the same...we need the community to be more engaged.” In short, those who would otherwise be closely tracking how effectively the city was managing its violence reduction initiative had shifted their attention and, in turn, the initiative had quickly begun to deteriorate.

## Lessons from the Field

A number of key lessons can be drawn from these case studies which have also shown up in organizing efforts around the country.

Principally, it is important to note that organizing victories are typically the product of numerous years of focused work. While dramatic events—like an officer-involved shooting or a spontaneous protest—can help shift momentum on a public issue, there needs to be an already-cultivated base of support and expertise that is ready to spring into intelligent action when the opportunity arises. As one of the organizers described it, “the idea was to create a

citywide climate that was overwhelmingly receptive to the [CVI] strategy so that when the right political moment came, a groundswell of community support would already be in place.”

Building community support depends heavily on the individual passion, creativity, and dedication of key organizers and community leaders, but there is also some underlying science to the methods used. Most cynicism related to the value of community organizing is predicated on the experience of having witnessed various types of activism that has failed to produce any real change. There is a difference, however, between community *activism* and community *organizing*. Activism is what most of the public sees—often in the form of protests, rallies, and marches—but most organizing occurs out of the limelight. Organizing is the steady and methodical development of community leaders who can act in coordination over the long term—beyond any one action or demonstration—in order to influence the material conditions of people’s lives. In all three of the case studies, community leaders used some time-honored organizing methods as well as some more recently-developed tactics that have increasingly become standard in relation to grassroots CVI campaigns.<sup>45</sup>

First, in all three cases, individual organizers created core teams of volunteer leaders who gradually grew their sphere of influence through dozens—sometimes hundreds—of **one-to-one meetings** with members of the community. These meetings had multiple purposes: 1) they helped build authentic relationships by giving individuals opportunities to share their personal stories, especially their experiences with gun violence and/or law enforcement, and 2) they helped the organizer better understand the person’s ideas, interests, and motivation for further action. As in the case of Indianapolis, organizers had a disciplined regimen of 15-20 one-to-one meetings per week, and months of this type of engagement with key members of the community became the building blocks for galvanizing residents to take more committed actions over time.

Second, in all three cities, part of the base-building process included **community night walks**. As mentioned above, the idea for these originally came from pastors in Boston who started walking the streets late at night to try to get a handle on the perspectives and mindsets of those who were perpetuating the violence. This practice was introduced in Oakland and then taught to community leaders in cities around the country. The purpose of these walks is not to prevent violence in and of itself (though some have confused them with CVI street outreach), but is to sensitize community leaders to the specific needs of the most vulnerable neighborhoods, build commitment to the issue, and provide opportunities for leaders to learn about strategies that need funding and support. Individuals who’ve participated in the night walks are often among those who show up to city council meetings, public actions, and other venues to speak and advocate for CVI.

A third common element is the ongoing **community education** related to CVI. In most cities, community members who care passionately about preventing gun violence have already tried

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<sup>45</sup> Since 2011, Live Free USA has developed a replicable framework for achieving CVI organizing victories. These methods have been taught to organizers across the country including organizers in these case studies.

multiple things to address the problem: after-school activities, mentoring programs, church ministries, or neighborhood peace events. In most cases, however, they have not had the opportunity to learn about the research base related to gun violence, visit cities where successful strategies have been implemented, or hear directly from national experts about technical aspects of the work. Once they do have these opportunities, the next step is to bring new ideas to the table with public officials. Research meetings with public officials are meant to build working relationships and exchange ideas about possible solutions: at this point, public officials have usually had even less exposure to proven violence intervention methods than community members and will reflexively suggest things like hiring more police, adding surveillance cameras, hosting gun buy-backs, or providing mini-grants to a range of community-based programs. Part of the work of organizers then becomes educating public officials about more effective strategies.

A fourth element is the **public demonstration of community power**. Generally speaking, public officials do not put a lot of stock in public safety ideas from community members and rely almost exclusively on law enforcement officials to generate ideas and proposals for reducing violence. This is part of why public actions become necessary. In all three case studies, organizers brought hundreds of community members to large-scale events, street demonstrations, or public hearings to seek public commitments from city officials. These types of events are typically covered by the press and draw public attention to the issue. Importantly, whether or not public officials make concrete commitments there on the spot, these actions put officials on notice that there is a political force that needs to be taken into account when making public safety decisions.

Finally, an additional tool implemented in both Oakland and Birmingham was the creation of **community-based decision-making bodies** focused on gun violence. In Oakland, a “working group” was established in order to monitor program implementation, troubleshoot issues, and ensure multiple voices were helping to inform the strategy. The group included city and law enforcement officials, representatives from intervention and wraparound service organizations, and clergy and community leaders. This was no “rubber stamp” committee: many ideas and issues were vigorously debated with the collective understanding that community leaders had real power behind them if they felt that their voices were not being well considered by city partners.

In Birmingham, organizers went a step further. Because city officials did not demonstrate much initial interest in CVI, the organizers created their own community table. City officials were invited, but the center of gravity came from community leaders themselves who were determined to build an effective strategy with or without the city’s help. In this case, organizers succeeded in shifting power in a way that gave the community’s plan more weight. The result was that once the HVIP plan was hatched and the public health department committed funding, the city—which had failed to commit funding during the previous four years—added their own \$2 million to the pot. Other cities have created different versions of this: whether called community steering committees, working groups, or roundtables, the key is shifting the locus of power so that community leaders become at least equal members—if not *leading* members—of

the group planning the initiative. In the case of Indianapolis, although there was not a formal body for this, the intensity of ongoing engagement between community members and city officials caused some organizers to call it a form of “co-governance” since so much time was spent not only helping to educate city officials, but co-planning, and providing accountability for results.

Though hard to sustain over time—particularly without resources—the types of organizing methods described above are critical to ensuring that public safety initiatives are authentically *community-led*. When initiatives are not co-constructed by community members, they are typically short-lived or prove ineffective. Oakland, in particular, provides a cautionary tale: after years of sustained reductions in violence as well as important policing reforms, when organizers took their foot off the gas, the CVI strategy drifted and ultimately failed. A similar phenomenon occurred in Boston in the 1990s: by the end of the decade, with changes in key police department staffing as well as an unraveling of the clergy coalition which had provided community accountability for the work, the program fell apart and shootings began to rise again.

Similarly, in all three cities, there were times where community members needed to push back against particular practices they viewed as harmful. The Ceasefire strategy (sometimes referred to as Group Violence Intervention) shows up in all three cases and is particularly vulnerable to being misused. This sometimes occurs when cities adopt the focused deterrence component of the strategy without providing any real services for program participants; similarly, police have sometimes utilized it as a sweeping suppression tactic to intimidate suspects (e.g., during one of its previous iterations in Oakland, it was combined with a city-wide gang injunction which indiscriminately rounded up individuals with past or dubious gang affiliations). In both Oakland and Indianapolis, the same organizing base that helped institute and monitor Ceasefire also helped push much needed reforms in policing since, for many residents, police violence is as much—if not more—of a threat as community violence.

More recently, some activists and organizers have gone so far as to begin to replace existing initiatives with their own—essentially expanding their role as advocates to becoming practitioners themselves. Force Detroit is a recent example of this: after years of advocating for changes to existing violence intervention practices, they raised a combination of public and private funds in order to implement their own CVI program. Similar work is being done in Orlando, Florida where the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, a statewide organization that won historic voting rights for individuals with felony convictions and also spent years pushing for CVI, launched its own street intervention program, also with impressive early results.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> With the technical assistance of Advance Peace and Live Free USA, Florida Rights Restoration Coalition launched Peace Orlando in 2022. After the first full year of implementation, the city saw a 36% reduction in injury shootings. <https://www.orlando.gov/News/Press-Releases/2024-Press-Releases/The-City-of-Orlando-Plans-to-Expand-its-Community-Violence-Intervention-Initiative#:~:text=The%20city%20launched%20the%20evidence,to%20Rosemont%20in%20March%202023.>

# Building A Mass Movement

As tempting as it might be to frame the solution to the gun violence crisis as a series of technical fixes, for the poor Black and Brown populations most impacted by it, relief comes down to a fundamental question: can they generate enough local power to demand a humane and effective system of public safety? With partial exceptions—some of which are described in this report—the answer has generally been no.

A national focus on gun control policy has not helped Black and Brown people build power in their communities. And while there is still a strong need to build the policy, communications, and lobbying capacity for grassroots leaders to engage in state and federal CVI advocacy, this approach on its own is wholly insufficient for scaling up effective CVI efforts. As described above, this is true for several reasons: 1) for the foreseeable future, state and federal funds will only cover a small fraction of CVI costs, 2) effective CVI implementation requires building local community accountability and expertise, and 3) local communities need sufficient power to simultaneously address multiple interconnected issues—particularly in relation to law enforcement—in order to ensure real public safety.

The reality is that massive social problems require massive social movements, and the type of power and momentum needed to make dramatic and lasting reductions in gun violence will require new types of movement building. The ultimate goal here is a massive cultural and political shift related to how the country thinks, talks, and acts in relation to gun violence. One metric of this is that, after each high-profile shooting, the reflexive rallying cry of the public and politicians would not be limited to universal background checks and assault weapons bans, but would include a loud bipartisan call for greater investments in CVI (in much the same way that perceptions of rising crime spark loud bipartisan calls for more police).



In order to build toward this reality, there are two main pressing lines of work: 1) investing in the local power of directly-impacted communities to support and co-lead CVI efforts, and 2) building a new bipartisan paradigm for addressing state and federal CVI policy.

## Investments in Local Power Building

The case studies in this report describe the types of organizing efforts that have been required in order to build community power and produce community-led public safety initiatives. Like their CVI practitioner colleagues, urban gun violence organizers are mainly Black and Latino, poorly paid (if at all), are often violence survivors themselves, and work in “mom and pop” community-based organizations that struggle to stay afloat. Many of the organizers described in the case studies were operating on a volunteer basis, doing their best to mobilize their communities in their “free time.” Even in cities with paid full-time organizers, their time is usually split across multiple issue campaigns because their organization’s funding is cobbled together from various philanthropies with a range of missions.

Home-grown organizers usually get into the field based on their own personal experiences with gun violence and, like CVI street outreach workers, come into the work with an already established network of relationships. With proper training and coaching, good relational organizers can also develop a disciplined rhythm of base-building tactics that allow them to build networks of hundreds of community leaders who can be readily mobilized as needed. The most effective organizers do this by purposefully building the leadership of others so that it is not the organizer themselves that is at the forefront of the movement, but rather a large number of activated residents who can collectively solidify power within the community.



Like any form of leadership development, community organizing requires sustained and targeted investments. Currently, there are already-established models for CVI organizing, but insufficient paid organizers to fill the need in the cities where gun violence is most rampant.<sup>47</sup> In order to build a sustained grassroots movement for CVI, what is needed is the development of a national network of public safety organizers who can build power in poor, Black and Brown communities. **Starting in the 50 cities with the highest homicide rates, full-time organizers could be paired with CVI practitioners and technical assistance providers in order to help build powerful bases of support for the creation of full CVI ecosystems.** This would not only shift local power in those cities, but would fuel state and national coalitions of grassroots advocates. Staffing two full-time organizers in 50 cities would cost about \$10 million per year and could be the tip of the spear in unlocking billions of local, state, and federal dollars for CVI.<sup>48</sup> This approach mirrors the targeted approach of the CVI model itself: rather than try to staff

<sup>47</sup> Live Free USA has spent over a decade training and coaching local organizers in replicable methods for winning CVI funding and ensuring effective CVI implementation.

<sup>48</sup> By way of comparison, gun control groups and their political affiliates raise over \$160 million per year. <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/the-new-gun-control-movement>

organizers in all 19,000 local police jurisdictions, the strategy would be to provide focused advocacy in a relatively small number of high-need cities thereby generating a larger ripple effect across the country.

## State and Federal Bipartisanship

While local base building must be the core strategy, state and federal investments can help catalyze local commitments. The good news here is that repeated polling demonstrates that there is broad bipartisan support for public investments in CVI, including a majority of Republicans.<sup>49</sup> While most respondents had not heard of CVI as such, descriptions of the strategies from the pollsters resonated with those surveyed, and opinions of CVI often improved further with additional descriptions. One implication of this is that more of the public simply needs to become aware of CVI.

At the same time, a critical stumbling block to getting wide support from Republican lawmakers is the way that many advocates have messaged it. Again, because most of the funded advocacy organizations focus on gun control, CVI gets framed as a supplemental strategy—alongside changes in gun laws—for reducing violence. This framing gives the impression that CVI is part of a gun control agenda and makes it politically radioactive for politicians for whom gun rights is a pillar of their policy agenda.

On its own, CVI actually checks off most of the boxes for GOP policymakers. The main arguments against gun control are that 1) they penalize law-abiding gun owners for the crimes of a small portion of irresponsible gun owners; 2) the gun itself is not the problem, but rather the mental health problems of mass shooters and the social decay of high-crime communities are to blame; and 3) restricting guns makes law-abiding citizens defenseless against general criminality and the heightened levels of violence that exist in our society.

Without the political baggage of a gun control agenda, CVI neatly addresses all of these concerns: 1) CVI does not require changing gun laws; 2) CVI strategies include intensive mental health services for those most likely to shoot others as well as workforce development to help them become self-sufficient and contributing members of society; and 3) alongside law enforcement, CVI helps to significantly reduce community violence thereby making law-abiding citizens safer while simultaneously easing the load for an overly-extended police force.

For many Republicans, CVI can also help address the political complications they face in the wake of high-profile mass shootings. In the days after the 2018 high school shooting in Parkland, FL, Senator Marco Rubio was grilled by devastated students and parents on a CNN-televised town hall. While there was little Rubio could have said in the moment to win the

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<sup>49</sup> A 2022 poll reaching 1,000 likely general election voters and found that 71% were in favor of using public funds for CVI (including 58% of Republicans).

<https://livefreeusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2022-CVI-Survey-Results-Lake-Research-Partners.pdf>

A 2023 poll of 1,153 likely voters similarly found that 76% were supportive of using ARPA funds for CVI (including 66% of Republicans). <https://safercitiesresearch.com/the-latest/polling-community-violence-interrupters>

crowd (beyond a full-throated endorsement of gun control laws), he and other Republicans could have, in the following days, made a strong case for CVI as a means of dramatically reducing gun violence throughout the state. By visually locking arms with Black and Latino families, he could have made a strong case for the need to make big CVI investments in cities like Miami, Jacksonville, and Orlando. Absent an organized CVI base or policy agenda, however, the State of Florida ended up allocating \$400 million toward school security and, to a lesser extent, school-based mental health—none of which



would address the sources of most shootings or prevent an increase in Florida murders over the next several years.<sup>50</sup> Alternatively, one could reasonably imagine how a bipartisan \$400 million investment in CVI over five years in the ten Florida cities with the highest homicide rates could have prevented thousands of fatal and nonfatal shootings.<sup>51</sup> Republican leaders could have then credibly bragged about achieving historic reductions in violent crime.<sup>52</sup>

Since then, Florida’s Republican supermajority legislature has passed minor CVI bills and there is every reason to believe that, with targeted advocacy investments and the right messengers, major CVI funding could be won in Florida and other red states. Credible messengers for Republican lawmakers on this issue should include survivors of gun violence, clergy, and law enforcement officials. One can imagine coalitions of these three constituencies showing up in the offices of governors and state legislators across the country, not only expressing a collective need for CVI investments, but citing real reductions that they’d achieved locally. A similar tactic could be used in relation to federal investments. While Democrat-sponsored CVI bills have hit brick walls in Congress, grassroots constituencies could work directly with Republican legislators to craft their own GOP-sponsored bills.

**Investments in grassroots community organizing combined with a more nuanced strategy of bipartisan messaging could unleash a mass movement of public support and investment in CVI across the country.** Currently, many of the cities with the highest homicide rates are in the Midwest and the South where CVI is at some of its earliest stages of development: places like Detroit, Birmingham, and Jackson, MS have historically failed to make major public CVI investments even though community-led solutions are desperately needed. While we have seen the ways that local power can be shifted with even minimal investments in organizing, it should not be hard to imagine what would be possible with a robust national strategy for building local grassroots power. At the same time, a revamped state and federal strategy anchored by

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<sup>50</sup> <https://www.fdle.state.fl.us/CJAB/UCR/Annual-Reports/UCR-Annual-Archives>

<sup>51</sup> During 5 years of CVI in Oakland, almost 1,200 fewer people were shot as compared to the pre-implementation year.

<sup>52</sup> In addition to the inherent value of reducing shootings, reduced gun violence results in massive taxpayer savings. In Florida, a single shooting costs taxpayers can cost between \$665k and \$2.4M depending on whether it is fatal and the number of suspects involved. <https://costofviolence.org/>

inner-city grassroots movements (and untethered from gun control groups) could potentially begin to unlock CVI dollars in Republican-led states or a Republican-dominated Congress. Currently, at least half the states in the country are Republican-led and have little chance of passing laws restricting firearms; that means that for much of the country, CVI is the only real statewide solution for dramatically reducing gun violence.

While the recent national attention toward CVI is encouraging, recent progress could be short-lived. The nightmare scenario for many CVI practitioners and advocates is that, in the next few years, a poorly-funded and poorly-supported field will fail to produce results, and in turn, public officials will sour on the potential and promise of CVI. To avoid this fate, we must quickly re-orient the ways that we advocate for gun violence prevention so that public safety in our most impacted neighborhoods can truly become community-based and community-led.