

Violence Interrupters: A Key Element of Justice Reform

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Communities that have been neglected and suffer from low economic mobility often turn to the informal sector for gainful employment. Interpersonal conflicts and the enforcement of drug transactions can sometimes result in violence. This instability is compounded by generations of trauma that have made violence a norm for resolving conflict.

Traditionally, cities have responded to community-level violence by increasing the presence of a militarized police force. This solution has repeatedly failed with sometimes fatal consequences, compounding trauma and leading to more violence. A new solution, one that comes from within the community itself, offers a new way forward: violence interrupters.

Addressing a Need and Filling in Gaps

Violence interrupter programs employ people who can directly disrupt cycles of violence by mediating conflicts within communities. Using a case management structure, the work of interrupters involves building a rapport and engaging with high-risk individuals daily. They also connect at-risk parties to services such as recreation, job training, financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and more to mitigate and prevent violence before it takes place.

In one such example, a group built a playground in Washington, D.C. Children are sometimes targeted early when negative influences can have an impact, and violence thrives in a vacuum without alternatives. The playground provided a safe area for recreation and for kids to be kids.

By creating these spaces and building relationships where people have been ignored for so long, programs like this offer healing opportunities. One D.C. government agency, the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement, has been called a blessing because they are asking what the community needs and offering those services.

How are Violence Interrupter Programs Funded and Structured?

Usually, a mayor's office (sometimes in partnership with a governor) directs funding for violence interrupters to nonprofit providers that run community-based programs. These nonprofits employ violence interrupters who know the neighborhoods well. Importantly, they have no direct connection to law enforcement. This gives them credibility in Black and brown communities where trust in law enforcement may be low.

Recruitment

There is a formula for hiring violence interrupters. They must understand the problem of violence in the community well to solve it effectively.

Violence interrupters always come from the community they serve. Many have been incarcerated or involved with the criminal legal system. They may have been deemed high-risk for violence in the past or have connections to people who are. This experience yields credibility and makes them effective violence interrupters in the communities where they work.

One provider in D.C., for example, hires local young people to be violence interrupters because they speak the language needed to build meaningful relationships. They experience the same trauma as the people they serve and carry it into the school and the community. The act of serving as a violence interrupter, and the process of working with them, can help h that trauma for all involved.

Violence interrupters and the people they connect with live in community together. They frequent school grounds and hotspots. They build relationships through consistent presence, giving out juice and muffins to students, for example, while talking about the importance of going to school and not letting anyone entice you to do something that could lead to violence.

Success Story: Washington, D.C.

In the Brentwood neighborhood of Washington, D.C., there were interrupters on site for five months working to establish trust with their community. They connected with youth who had been let down so often that they didn't know where to turn for support and guidance. The interrupters took them on trips and offered programming. This had a profound impact and reversed the problem of violence in that community.

In Washington, D.C., where it was found that a small number of people were committing the majority of the violence, these interventions are one powerful way to intercept and prevent conflict before it takes root.

Methodology

In Baltimore, violence interrupters canvas communities. They are assigned high-risk individuals in a case management model. In the event of an incident, they respond to the scene.

Each violence interrupter will canvas 5-10 people on a typical day. Daily strategic plans are created to engage and build relationships with high-risk individuals. If conflicts that could result in gun violence arise, they respond. Violence interrupters and site staff work together to address hotspots in the neighborhood and use their established relationships to shift the trajectory of violence.

Interrupters coach and assist people in accessing services, such as access to government documents or mental health care. They connect individuals to social services and then coach them to success. They change behavioral norms in the community by modeling how to react to stress. In areas where many people are hurting, they shift that hurt forward.

In practice, interrupters play a crucial role in offering alternatives that stop violence. They organize community events to spread the message of nonviolence. They engage in consistent outreach with youth.

Because violence interrupters are always from the neighborhoods where they work, they have unique insights into the needs and concerns of the people they serve. They can vet the available programs and resources to ensure that they are stable and meet the needs of their community.

Effectiveness and Challenges

This work is complex and comes with many challenges. One is proving the effectiveness of an interrupter's interventions. It's difficult to demonstrate that a shooting didn't happen because of the work of interrupters, and easy to pick out discreet failures of a program.

There are potential flaws in this model that cannot be avoided. For example, part of what enables many interrupters to build relationships successfully is that they have been involved in the informal sector or experienced incarceration. Some of them lack the skills necessary to work in a professional setting. And there is a risk of relapse and a return to their former lives. When these instances come to light, they can reflect poorly on violence interruption as a model.

Another genuine concern is burnout. Violence interruption is not a job a person can do for more than five years at a time. Being surrounded by and mitigating violence daily is grueling and traumatizing. Not only is it critical to provide services like group therapy to violence interrupters, but it is important to help them transition out of the work. There must be a pipeline out of violence interruption work, as well as a new slate of violence interrupters coming into the organization.

A final challenge is securing sustained funding for long-term work. Right now, violence interruption is a popular concept. Programs nationwide receive federal funding from the Community Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative (CVI). In FY23, the federal government provided \$50 million to this program through regular appropriations. An additional \$250 million

came from the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (Public Law No. 117–159), but those funds expire in 2026.

Violence will not be eradicated by then. Program administrators worry about what could happen to the funding for these programs in the future when the buzz about them dies down. The work will be no less critical, communities will still face ongoing trauma, and therefore violence will be present.

Success Story: Safe Streets Baltimore

Safe Streets Baltimore was established in 2007. It operates in 10 Baltimore neighborhoods that have long experienced structural racism, chronic disinvestment, and high rates of gun violence.

*A **study** by the Center for Gun Violence Solutions of Johns Hopkins University revealed that Safe Streets reduced homicides and nonfatal shootings overall from 2007 to 2022 in Baltimore. It reduced such shootings by as much as 32% in some sites. The study also found that every \$1 invested in violence prevention yielded \$7-19 in economic benefits.*

The Sandtown neighborhood in Baltimore is one of the places where the impact of violence interruption programs can be witnessed. The area has seen consistent reductions in shootings and homicides over a period of six years.

In that time, a participant came into the program to receive services. After two years, they became a violence interrupter. In three years, he was promoted to supervisor. This is a man who was previously known to carry firearms and engage in unlawful activities in the community. Today he is a stellar contributor to Safe Streets Baltimore. He hasn't experienced any relapse and is well respected in the community. We have not named him here, because he is apprehensive about media coverage and attention.

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