

How Treating Gun Violence Like A Disease Helps Stem The Rise In Deadly Shootings

Violence Interrupters are the centerpiece in nationwide Cure Violence programs, but their leaders are fighting an uphill battle.



Photo: Frank Brown

Night after night, even as the number of shootings have increased in central Brooklyn neighborhoods, a group of violence interrupters, armed only with the respect they have in the community, try to quash potentially deadly confrontations before they erupt.

Some of Elite Learners Inc.'s violence interrupters are formerly incarcerated gang members. They've turned their lives around and are now using their street savvy and connections to mediate conflicts and mentor high-risk young men in the New York City borough's high-crime areas.

"There are a lot of kids out there who are into gangs and other things. And then you have some who, basically once you talk to them, they're actually looking for

love, because they maybe don't have the father figure in their life," Elite Learners violence interrupter Matthew Smith told BET.com.

Smith has been a violence interrupter for a little more than a year, serving in the New York City borough's Prospect Lefferts Garden neighborhood.

His focus is on giving back to the community. "I try to give troubled kids information on how to live a positive, productive life and not be on the streets doing things that they're not supposed to do," Smith added.

In addition to building relationships in the community, Smith shares information about the resources available to set them on a path to success in life. The work is making a difference.

"Crime has been down. A lot of the youths come into the office and greet us with respect. And we help them out to the best of our ability, wherever they are," he said. "Some of them dropped out of school and are trying to get their GED. Others don't have IDs, and we help them with that. Any way that we could possibly help them."

Across the nation, firearm homicides reached an historic high in 2020 and has become a major public health issue, a Centers for Disease and Prevention report released in May said. Violence interrupters like Smith have emerged as one of the effective tools in the battle to stem the rising tide. Building and maintaining these teams is both challenging and rewarding.

Camara Jackson, Elite Learners' executive director, told BET.com that the organization's original focus was squarely on educational and mentorship programs at underserved schools. But violence kept disrupting their mission.

"Inside the school, we couldn't get through a mentorship program because people were fighting and arguing. And outside, leaving school at the end of the day wasn't safe. Kids were getting shot on basketball courts," Jackson recalled. "So I decided to add an anti-violence element to our programming."

Treating violence like a disease

There are several approaches to violence interruption work. For example, the Boston Gun Project uses a problem-oriented policing model to tackle serious, large-scale crime, such as homicide victimization among youths. There's also Advance Peace, which builds on other violence deterrence approaches but among its differences from other models, AP doesn't work with law enforcement, focus on gangs or change group behaviors.

Jackson chose to adopt the Cure Violence approach to building Elite Learner's team. Founded in 2000 in Chicago by Dr. Gary Slutkin, an epidemiologist, this model, previously known as Cease Fire, treats violence like a disease. It aims to "interrupt" the spread of that disease by hiring people from the community to prevent or mediate violent conflicts.

Today, Chicago-based Cure Violence Global (CVG) provides the training and infrastructure to support program replication in other U.S. cities and across the world. "What we do is help jurisdictions implement the model and maintain the fidelity of the model so that certain results can be achieved," CVG's CEO Dr. Fredrick Echols told BET.com.

The Cure Violence approach involves detecting and interrupting potentially violent situations, intervening with high-risk individuals, changing group behavior, and collecting data for analysis. Violence interrupters serve as the ground troops. They often have personal relationships with high-risk subjects and command respect in the community.

Total buy-in critical to success

Building a Cure Violence team has its challenges. In 2010, Pennsylvania wanted to start a Cure Violence program in Philadelphia, particularly in the North Philadelphia 22nd police district that had the highest number of homicide shootings at the time, Marla Davis Bellamy, the director of Philadelphia CeaseFire at Temple University, told BET.com.

Davis Bellamy, the former Pennsylvania Department of Health chief of staff, said officials sought to find a community-based organization to head the program.

"But unfortunately, we could not find a viable nonprofit that had an administrative structure, as well as financial stability, to implement the program," she said. "So then we turned to Temple University, which is physically located in the target area, and said to them, you know, this might be something that the university might embrace, because at the time, Chicago Ceasefire was housed at the University of Illinois."

Temple's Medical School dean agreed that the university should be involved in Cure Violence, given its public health approach, Davis Bellamy recalled. And in 2011, Philadelphia CeaseFire launched at the university.

To launch a successful program, Echols said there must be buy-in from a range of stakeholders and the proper infrastructure in place to plant the program successfully.

"This extends far beyond just the mayor's office or the governor's office. You need to see public health departments on board, elected officials on board, as well as community-based organizations, such as churches, that can provide a grassroots component," Echols, the former Health Commissioner of

St. Louis, stated.

In some cases, officials may want to launch a Cure Violence program but lack the proper infrastructure.

"One of the things that typically stifles progress is the lack of collaboration across different organizations," Echols noted. "If organizations aren't willing to work together, that will set the program up to fail."

In New York City, former Mayor Bill de Blasio embraced Cure Violence. In December 2021, he announced that the city received a \$20.5 million federal grant to support its Cure Violence program providers. The city had already established a Crisis Management System network that coordinated its anti-violence efforts across the city.

"New York City has demonstrated time and again that the most effective solutions to gun violence come from the grassroots," de Blasio said. "Investments by this administration in community-based violence prevention programs have increased public safety, stemmed violence, and saved lives."

Ground troops

Violence interrupters are the centerpiece of the Cure Violence method. Echols said success depends on hiring the right candidates. Interrupters must be "credible messengers" because not every formerly incarcerated individual or former gang member is an automatic fit.

"A part of our screening process entails verifying that they are credible, and we take significant steps to make sure that we verify their credibility," he said. "That's really important because if you have the wrong person doing this work, we are setting them up to get killed. This is very dangerous work."

Davis Bellamy said Philadelphia CeaseFire's process includes a community hiring panel "to weigh in on the candidate," as well as a background check. She underscored the importance of community involvement to succeed. That's why she spends much of her time building and maintaining relationships with community stakeholders.

"In terms of personal qualities, we look for someone who is a communicator, well organized and likes to work with young people," Jackson said, adding that it's important to verify that the candidate is no longer involved in criminal activities.

CVG provides violence interrupter training. But there's also a lot of on-the-job training involved.

"Our team members develop their skills over a period of time. We tell them every situation is unique. There are some situations where we can't engage when weapons are already drawn, versus when the weapons are not drawn," said Jackson, who has more than 50 interrupters on her team.

Hidden Operating Costs

Elite Learners took its first steps toward building its Cure Violence program in 2015. Jackson said much of the expenses to run the program goes to salaries and materials, such as flyers and brochures, for outreach in the communities they patrol.

There are also hidden costs that are quite expensive for nonprofits and often are not included from funding. For example, Elite Learners provides emergency housing, out-of-pocket, to place clients in a safe place.

"A lot of times my participants can't go back home, or they're afraid

that someone in their family will be killed. Or they got into an argument and someone is looking for them. So we spend a lot of money to put people in safe places," Jackson said.

Also, nonprofit offices often lack private rooms to mediate conflicts. As a safety matter, gang members typically don't want to be seen with their rivals, she noted. Doing anti-violence work effectively requires affording adequate office space.

Transportation is another hidden high-cost item. "It's impossible for violence interrupters to be successful if they don't have the means to get from point A to point B, especially if something happens abruptly, late at night," Jackson explained.

Measuring Success

When advocating for Cure Violence, Echols said he lets the data speak for the effectiveness of the approach. A 2021 CVG report says Cure Violence "was likely associated with a 30% reduction in the rate of shootings in the three PSAs (police services areas)" in Philadelphia in 2017. In New York City, the report noted a 63% reduction in shootings in Brooklyn's East New York neighborhood in 2017.

A John Jay College of Criminal Justice study published in 2017 echoed those findings. It looked at two Cure Violence programs, Man Up! in East New York and Save Our Streets in the South Bronx.

"Each of the two neighborhoods was compared with another neighborhood that had similar demographics and crime trends but no Cure Violence program. As detailed in this report, the comparisons provide promising evidence that the public health approach to violence reduction

championed by Cure Violence may be capable of creating safe and healthy communities," the study found.

Cure Violence has been praised in other cities, at a time when the gun violence rate has skyrocketed. In 2022, St. Louis mayor Tishaura Jones credited its Cure Violence program for helping to reduce the city's homicides by more than 25% in 2021. St. Louis invested \$7 million to fund the implementation of Cure Violence in 2019 and launched in 2020.

But the Cure Violence approach does have its critics.

"If Cure Violence reduced homicides and gun assaults and contributed to the overall reductions in these offenses between 2020 and 2021, we should observe greater reductions in the Cure Violence neighborhoods than in the comparison neighborhoods," St. Louis-based criminologist Rick Rosenfeld told TIME magazine.

His analysis found that homicides and gun assaults did not decrease in Cure Violence neighborhoods any more than it did in neighborhoods that didn't have the program. Rosenfeld cautioned that his data is based on just a one-year analysis. As TIME noted, other researchers have found mixed results in Cure Violence programs operated in some Pittsburgh and Chicago neighborhoods.

But as Jones stated, "Cure Violence isn't a silver bullet. It was never built to be a silver bullet. But it is one piece of a larger holistic strategy."

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