Cobe Williams—jailed twice for drug possession, twice for aggravated battery—sits inside a bright storefront in Chicago’s South Shore neighborhood, listening closely as four other ex-offenders trade news from the troubled streets. A group’s simmering feud recently erupted in a killing. Another shooting put someone in the hospital. “We’re following up real close with the ongoing conflict,” says a former drug dealer. “The young guys turned against the older guys over territory; they were tired of not getting money.” Williams, 43, eyes the other men with respect. “They know what’s going on,” he says. “They’ve got to.”

There was a time when these former gang leaders and drug-runners might have taken sides in a street fight, but tonight, when they head out to the gas station and liquor store hot spots where talk of the tension is brewing, they are focused on a different goal: to defuse any old and emerging street grudges before any shots are fired.

In Chicago the organization is known as CeaseFire; in Baltimore it’s called Safe Streets; in Kansas City, Mo., it’s Aim4Peace. But all fall under the umbrella of Cure Violence, an expanding national and international effort shaped by Gary Slutkin, a University of Illinois-Chicago public health professor and epidemiologist who’s applying the lessons he learned battling infectious diseases to target the spread of violence. In the same way that health workers step in to control a medical epidemic, Cure Violence aims to curb shootings by deploying “interrupters,” people with street cred and access to high-risk offenders in their own neighborhoods, to run interference on violence before it happens. And it works: Shootings dropped between 41 percent and 73 percent in seven communities studied by Northwestern University after Cure Violence launched in Chicago in 2000. “These are lifesaving services,” says Daniel Webster, with the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research. “It’s not an easy program to do well, but it can have significant reduction in gun violence.”
Williams, who turned his life around after prison and now trains other interrupters, it also offers a chance at redemption. “All of us were part of that problem,” he says. “I’m part of the solution now.”

**Cure Violence, which relies on government and foundation grants, aims to shift the conversation from gun control and criminal justice to understanding what drives people to act violently in the first place, says Slutkin, 65. “We could clearly see that this [violence] was a behavior, that outreach was needed,” he says. “People exposed to violence have a greater likelihood of doing it the more they’re exposed.” Slutkin reasoned that the “cure” could be finding workers to infiltrate those volatile social circles, “cool them down” and change their view of what’s expected of them and ultimately their reaction the next time around.”

Of course, that kind of change doesn’t happen overnight. To gain confidence and establish trust, Cure Violence deploys a three-pronged line of defense, using staffers who know the turf and, in some cases, may even have been former crime associates with those to whom they reach out. “Outreach workers” schmooze over pizza or videos, help with jobs, even ferry students to school; “violence interrupters” are the strike force, diving unarmed into heated disputes and negotiating compromises that buy time, allowing the aggrieved participants to save face and defuse retaliation; “hospital responders” race to the side of injured victims and their friends and families before anger can fester in the aftermath of an incident.

Although the process can take months to show results, Slutkin maintains that in the long run, it’s well worth the time and money. “What’s really costly,” he says, “is not doing this.”

**For Williams, it’s also about breaking the chain.** He lost his own father, whom he calls a “big-time drug dealer,” to violence when he was 11. And yet, he says, he followed right in his footsteps. “I knew right from wrong, but I still chose to do the wrong thing because that’s what I saw,” he says. Imprisoned four times by the time he was 22, Williams says watching his then 4-year-old son Latrell cry for him in court was the turning point. “I didn’t want to see anybody else raising him,” he says. “I wanted to be there.” Latrell, now 20 and working at a Sam’s...
Club, says, “He never tried to make the street life look cool to me. He always let me know, ‘This ain’t for you.’”

These days Williams tries to forge change with his old contacts—like close friend “Big Mike” Nash, 35, who says Williams taught him to deal drugs before he turned his life around. But he does it without judgment. “He never once said, ‘Don’t do this, don’t do that,’” says Nash. “And then he finally said, ‘Man, look, these dudes don’t care about you; you go to jail, they ain’t gonna help you.’ You can only recall who looked out for you, and he was there, so why not listen and give him a chance?” Says Williams: “It’s all about the relationship. You just listen. You got to validate what they’re saying. Keep following up with them. The follow-up is the most critical part.”

And even when his efforts are rejected, “I’m still planting a seed,” he says. “It’s about inspiring them and letting them know ‘you’re not alone.’ People I used to run the streets with, they call me their hero now. That makes me feel good.”