

Studies Show That Violence Prevention Saves Cities Money — Lots of Money

By Keren Landman

June 4, 2020



Cities United Executive Director Anthony Smith (center) says there's an obvious moral argument for violence prevention but financial arguments are not their opposite. He was with Hampton, Va., Mayor Donnie Tuck (left) and Louisville, Ky., Mayor Greg Fischer at the organization's 6th Annual Convening in August 2019. | CITIES UNITED

In the 18 years Paul Tutwiler has led the Northwest Jacksonville Community Development Corporation in Florida, the organization has tried a variety of strategies to reduce the neighborhood's high levels of violent crime, all of them in collaboration with the local sheriff's office. None have worked.

"We realized that while we have had some successes in being able to make some improvements in the neighborhood, we really were not solving the problem," he said. "In fact, we were displacing the problem — removing the problems to other areas, and sometimes, right around the corner or a couple of blocks over."

The problem needed a fresh look — and to Tutwiler and many other Jacksonville leaders, that look was Cure Violence. The program, which originated in Chicago, aims to reduce violence by approaching it as a communicable disease: In the immediate aftermath of a shooting,

trained violence interrupters and outreach workers work in the community and at hospitals to prevent the spiral of retaliatory violence that often follows.

They also connect the highest-risk people with services and support, and work to change community norms, which Tutwiler said is critical: "The problem began when we ignored the individuals in front of our house or allowed them to sell drugs or engage in this behavior," he said. For the safety of its workers, the program does not engage with law enforcement.

The program currently operates in more than 25 U.S. cities and 15 countries, and it has demonstrated dramatically positive results: a 56% reduction in killings in Baltimore; a 63% reduction in shootings in the South Bronx; 100% reductions in retaliation homicides in five of eight Chicago communities. Similar programs, like Advance Peace, the Group Violence Intervention and many hospital-based violence prevention programs have also had durable results.

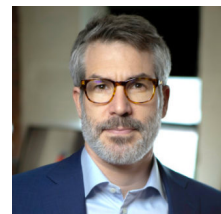
All rely on the use of credible messengers — "people who are respected community members who chose a different path," said Marie Crandall, a surgeon at the University of Florida College of Medicine in Jacksonville. Her experiences with Cure Violence during her Chicago medical training led her to advocate for Jacksonville's adoption of the program.

The 'wrong-pockets problem'

According to Cure Violence's calculations, the program doesn't just save lives — it saves money: Every dollar spent on the program reduces medical and criminal justice costs by nearly \$16. Increasingly, activists and city administrators are realizing that the true

savings of violence prevention are likely even higher than that — and that the financial case for implementing violence prevention programs may be the most compelling one to some stakeholders.

Although economists have been examining the cost of violence for decades, several recent efforts have yielded some staggeringly large estimates of the potential savings to taxpayers that even small reductions in urban violence could produce.



Thomas Abt
BASIC BOOKS

"Basically, anything you do to address urban gun violence pays for itself many times over, even if it's only moderately effective — even if it's expensive, because the cost of a single homicide is so expensive," wrote Thomas Abt in an email. He's a senior fellow at the Council on Criminal Justice and author of the book "Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence — and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets."

Still, funding violence prevention often runs up against the "wrong-pockets problem," said Abt — the question of whether the city official who makes a violence prevention decision sees the windfall that decision yields. "That's very hard to figure out, and so the idea that you can change a particular policymaker's behavior is much harder because they may not see those savings," he said.

Still, violence prevention is often presented as "the right thing to do"

without also being presented as the financially responsible thing to do.

There is an obvious moral argument for violence prevention, said Anthony Smith, executive director of Cities United — but financial arguments are not their opposite. They're just easier to sell to folks who "might see it as a moral thing," he said, but "don't move in a way that they would move if it were the economic and bottom line."

Cities United helps cities comprehensively prevent violence by supporting their implementation of violence interruption programs and facilitating other, longer-term systems-change work.

How to price gun violence

City administrators need to know how much violence costs to determine how much money violence prevention saves. The great majority of violent crime in the U.S. involves guns — and in any city, a cascade of events follows a shooting, beginning at the scene of the crime. Police, fire department and emergency medical services respond to the scene, and a police investigation takes place.

Once evidence is gathered, a specialized company conducts a cleanup of the crime scene. Gunshot victims are stabilized in trauma centers and often undergo surgery, inpatient hospital care and stay in rehabilitation centers.

Meanwhile, the case against the alleged perpetrator of a shooting moves through the criminal justice system, which usually includes prosecution by the district attorney and defense by the public defender and a court process. During this process — and afterward, if a guilty verdict is handed down — the alleged perpetrator is incarcerated in a county or city jail, then in state prison.

In the case of a homicide, gunshot victims may be autopsied and must be buried, and their surviving loved ones may require bereavement support and additional financial support if the victim was the household's main breadwinner. Surviving gunshot victims are often temporarily or permanently disabled and unable to return to work. In the case of incarceration of the alleged perpetrator and/or death of the victim, neither will pay income or sales tax.

Each of these points in the cascade costs money — but exactly how much? In 2018, the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR) tried to answer that question in a series of studies of the cost per shooting in six U.S. cities. The lowest cost for a fatal shooting was in Mobile, Ala. (\$765,000) and the highest was in Stockton, Calif. (\$2.5 million).



Paul Tutwiler (left), CEO of the Northwest Jacksonville Community Development Corporation, says it's critical that Cure Violence works to change community norms. | COURTESY OF PAUL TUTWILER

The estimated costs were for shootings involving one suspect, and often nearly doubled when two suspects were involved. The biggest costs — which were likely to also affect state budgets — came from incarceration, which at minimum cost more than four times any other sector's costs.

The cost to prevent one homicide is about \$30,000, Abt estimates, in the context of a city's rollout of a combination of violence prevention efforts. Using that figure, the return on a violence prevention investment in Mobile would be nearly 26-fold; Stockton's investment would return \$83 for each dollar spent. Even with prison placement costs removed, the return on investment would be substantial: 9-fold in Mobile and 16-fold in Stockton.

The savings of less violence

In a 2012 report, the Center for American Progress (CAP) presented estimates of the costs of violent crime to eight U.S. cities, including Jacksonville. In addition to many of the costs later counted in the NICJR studies, the CAP report tried to quantify the intangible costs of survivors' pain and suffering.

It also presented an analysis of the savings each city could expect if its violent crime rates decreased by either 10% or 25%.

These savings included lower spending on police departments and courts and higher revenues from income earned by people who otherwise would have been crime victims or perpetrators.

But it was another source of savings that dominated a potential lower-crime landscape: housing values. The report found that homicides had a remarkable influence on the cost of housing in the neighborhoods where they took place: On average, reducing homicides in one ZIP code in one year yielded a 1.5% increase in housing values in that ZIP code the following year. The results were robust and consistent across the metropolitan areas of all eight cities.

When housing values increase, the property tax revenues assessed also eventually rise. Over time, higher-valued housing stock leads to increased home sales, permitting and construction costs, all of which add dollars to city coffers. In turn, these changes draw business investment in neighborhoods, presenting additional sources of tax revenue.

The CAP report did not go so far as to project financial gains from the downstream effects of increasing housing values, nor to estimate the dollar value of increases in property tax revenue — it only projected cities' expected total increase in the value of its housing stock with a 10% reduction in homicides. In Jacksonville, that expected increase was \$600 million.

The NICJR studies did not consider lost property revenues among their costs. But in 2019, the city of Philadelphia did: After a year in which the city saw more homicides than in a decade, the office of its controller published a report that focused on the financial losses the city has sustained due to homicides, particularly on lost property value and tax revenue.

Philadelphia Controller Rebecca Rhynhart has seen other worthwhile projects go unfunded because cities argue they cannot afford them. "What I wanted to show," she said, "is that there really isn't an argument to be made that we don't have the resources to fight this."

The report centered on the link the CAP report had identified between neighborhood safety and home value.

Philadelphia found that on average, eliminating one homicide would lead to a 2.3% increase in sale prices in the immediate neighborhood. According to the authors' projections, reducing homicides by 10% in a single year would cost \$10.5 million and yield a \$13 million increase in property tax revenue. Over five years, the compounding effect of taxing an increasingly valuable home would bump the increased revenue to \$114 million and the costs to \$43 million — more than a 2.5-fold return on each dollar.

Did the eight cities in the 2012 CAP report begin violence prevention efforts in response to the study? Smith of Cities United doesn't know. Such programs have begun in some of those cities since the report came out (Philadelphia and Boston, for instance), but it's not clear that was in response to the report.

Leaders in other cities may also be increasingly aware of the financial benefits of violence prevention. In a Chicago Sun-Times editorial last October, several city aldermen wrote that if Chicago rededicated to violence prevention just a fraction of the \$3.5 billion it spends annually to cope with the downstream effects of gun violence, "we could save taxpayers billions of dollars every year."

Funding can be the barrier

What does it actually take for a city to sustainably reduce violence? When Cities United helps a city try to achieve that goal, it starts with the mayors, Smith said. They choose a team of program champions from among their staff and the community. After a weeklong training at the organization's Louisville, Ky. headquarters, that team starts down a path toward implementing a violence prevention program.

The biggest obstacles they face are not where you might expect them: Law enforcement officials are usually receptive to violence prevention programs, Smith said. "You hear over and over again, 'We can't arrest our way out of this,'" he said.

It's when the budget conversation starts that things get a little tricky. "The first thing that people go to is, 'Are you taking dollars away?'" he said. And sometimes, to make sure enough is invested up front to help a violence prevention program

be effective, money may indeed come out of the budget of a police department or another city line item. Smith tries to reframe the conversation around how violence prevention will help law enforcement meet its own goals, and the value of working in partnership: "It's an add-on in the long term that makes everybody's job easier."

It's not just law enforcement who pushes back on this change in paradigm: "Community members who don't understand and who actually already feel safe because of law enforcement feel like they're losing something, too," he said. Elected officials seeking to appear "tough on crime" sometimes can't see a path toward that image that includes violence prevention.

Smith pushes city officials to fund violence prevention programs fully and for the long term, as discontinuous or inadequate funding for these programs can cause real damage — not only to these programs' credibility, but to the people at the heart of their work. Over the 20-year lifespan of Cure Violence, funding for the program's Chicago sites has lapsed three times. Each lapse has been associated with striking increases in violence in the neighborhoods served by those sites.

It's not as simple as cause and effect, Crandall said, but when people sense a larger investment in and hope for the community from the outside, they may more readily think about alternatives to settling differences with a firearm. "When funding dramatically changes and people feel that they don't matter anymore, then the fuse is shorter," she said. "It's a natural human reaction."

Smith said he is often frustrated that the halfhearted funding of violence prevention programs results in incomplete "professionalization" of the people who put their lives on the line to do the street-level work: Outreach workers and violence interrupters usually work part-time and without benefits, he said, including mental health support and clear pathways for advancement. Inadequate support raises their risk for returning to illegal activities just to make ends meet, he said.

In communities where violence has been the norm for years, violence prevention programs alone are not enough to create

lasting change. For that reason, the second prong of Cities United's approach is to ask mayors to think long term about what public safety really means.

"It's not about jails, law enforcement and detention centers, but it really is about access to quality education, access to affordable housing, opportunities to make a living wage," Smith said. "We want to reduce homicides, but we also want to make sure that the folks that we're keeping alive have reason to be alive, right?"

When the CAP report was published in 2012, its estimates indicated a 10% reduction in homicides in Jacksonville could save \$4 million annually and lower costs to victims by \$88 million annually. If homicides were reduced by a quarter, the added savings could enable the city to increase local spending on economic development by as much as 26%.

In 2019, the city's Cure Violence program reportedly received \$2.4 million from the city council, and the city recently requested an additional \$750,000 from the Florida Legislature. U.S. Rep. Mike Quigley, who represents an Illinois district that includes parts of Chicago, is working toward reintroducing a bill similar to the Public Health Violence Prevention Act, which he first introduced in 2017. That bill requested \$1 billion in funding to broadly support programs aimed at reducing violence in a wide variety of sectors, including public health, nonprofits, health care facilities, schools and universities.

The message Smith sees in analyses like one Philadelphia conducted is clear: "We need to pay this up front because of what it saves us in the long run," he said — and not just in the number of lives saved. "The bigger picture for most of the folks that you try to make the financial case to is, 'What does the city gain in the end?'"

This is the third in a Northeast Florida-focused series collaboration between WJCT, Jaxlookout and the Center for Sustainable Journalism, which publishes Youth Today and the Juvenile Justice Information Exchange. This series is part of the Center's national project on gun violence. Support is provided by The Kendeda Fund. The Center is solely responsible for the content and maintains editorial independence.