

Andrew Papachristos: Targeted violence prevention is working in Chicago. Workers need to reach more people.



The street outreach team of FLIP, for Flatlining Violence Inspires Peace, is seen in Chicago's Roseland neighborhood on July 13, 2023. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

There are a lot of strategies to reduce gun violence, but one of the most innovative and straightforward is underway right

here in Chicago. Essentially, it comes down to this: Hire people with close relationships to those doing the shooting, train and supervise them, and place them at the most dangerous locations in the city, unarmed, to discourage gun violence.

The strategy is called FLIP, which stands for “flatlining violence inspires peace.” Starting in 2018 with private funding, FLIP targeted 21 hot spots in three high-crime neighborhoods during summertime evenings and weekends. The impact was immediate. Shootings at those locations were significantly lower when “peacekeepers” were on duty.

Today, FLIP is publicly funded by the state and covers 102 hot spots year-round in 14 Chicago neighborhoods. Ten violence prevention organizations are participating in the Chicago program so far. State funding is also available to launch the program in surrounding suburbs. Our organization at Northwestern University, the [Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research & Science](#), or CORNERS, has been studying FLIP for the past two years. We publish updates and share data with our community partners to inform on-the-ground efforts. As researchers, we are always careful about implying causation related to gun violence reduction strategies like FLIP, but ongoing research is certainly suggestive.

For example:

- Over Memorial Day weekend, the city experienced around 60 shootings, but there were none at 99 of 102 FLIP locations while FLIP workers were on duty.
- Over the last three years, 13 of the 14 FLIP communities experienced overall reductions in gun violence greater than the city.

As part of their duties, FLIP workers intervene directly in ongoing disputes among individuals and negotiate nonaggression agreements among the hundreds of street factions active in Chicago. In fact, CORNERS has documented more than 400 mediations and 58 nonaggression agreements among opposing factions.

It's dangerous work that puts these individuals at [considerable risk](#). A few have been shot while on duty. Even more have been shot off-duty, affirming that they are still very much at risk.

For the men and women doing the work, however, the risks are worth it. They get to be part of solving violence and making their communities safer. They get a steady paycheck in the legal economy. And, for individuals with limited job

skills and criminal backgrounds, it's a job for which these peacekeepers are uniquely qualified. They alone have the LTO, or "license to operate," to engage with the highest-risk individuals.

[[Opinion series: Turning the tide on Chicago's gun violence](#)]

Today, there is a growing consensus among policymakers, advocates, nonprofits and business leaders that Chicago should scale up community violence intervention programs to help enhance the city's broader public safety strategies. One big obstacle, however, is the workforce.

Right now, there are approximately 230 front-line community violence intervention workers scattered across the city. By the best estimates, they're serving about 15% to 20% of the thousands of high-risk individuals in Chicago.

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The average age of Chicago's outreach workers is nearly [45 years old](#). While they come with a wealth of lived experience,

there is an unmistakable generation gap. Essentially, a labor force of formerly gang-involved Gen X people who came of age in an era of large, centralized street gangs are trying to connect with Gen Z individuals in highly decentralized street factions that battle it out on Instagram.

Lance Barnes, right, an outreach worker with the anti-violence group Alliance of Local Service Organizations, or ALSO, serves free food during a Light In the Night event in Humboldt Park in Chicago on July 14, 2023. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

Roughly half of the 500 FLIP peacekeepers working in Chicago today are between the ages of 25 and 35, no longer youths yet squarely within the riskiest age for gunshot victimization in Chicago, [which is 27 years old](#). Developing a younger, more diverse violence prevention workforce is vital to the long-term success of violence prevention organizations. The good news is that FLIP is becoming a pipeline into the field. In fact, since 2018, more than 100 FLIP peacekeepers have advanced into full-time community violence intervention roles.

Questions remain. Will the law enforcement community buy into the FLIP strategy and the broader community violence intervention approach? Will the public sector continue to fund these programs? And will the evidence continue to justify them? So far, all signs point to yes. Police are cooperating; federal, state and local governments are investing; and the early results are encouraging.

The bottom line is that community violence intervention programs and strategies are saving lives. Again, it's difficult to causally link shootings that did not happen to specific initiatives, but CORNERS found that neighborhoods that were part of a violence intervention collaborative called Communities Partnering 4 Peace [had nearly 383 fewer homicides and shootings](#) than would have otherwise been expected.

Now, more than ever, Chicago is poised to lead the nation in developing and implementing new and better ways to reduce gun violence. With lives on the line, we have no time to waste.

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