

# POLICING GUNS AND GUN VIOLENCE

A TOOLKIT FOR PRACTITIONERS AND ADVOCATES

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Gun violence is an ever-pressing problem in the United States, but its impact is not evenly distributed. Communities of color bear the brunt of this tragedy, with the majority of gun homicides and non-fatal shootings concentrated in these already marginalized and underserved areas.<sup>1</sup> However, even within those communities, it is only a very small percentage of the population that is associated with the majority of known homicides and shootings.<sup>2</sup> Traditional methods of responding to violence in these communities have not created adequate levels of safety, but instead left the communities over-policed and under-protected, with high levels of law enforcement contact (such as street stops, arrests, and prosecutions), homicides, and gun crime.

Mistrust of police and a lack of confidence that they can prevent gun violence can create fear, which in turn leads people to acquire and carry weapons for their own safety. Law enforcement strategies intended to prevent gun violence, such as high levels of pretextual vehicle stops and pedestrian stop and frisks, have alienated communities and resulted in gun carrying and “self-help” violence in the name of self-protection.<sup>3</sup> A growing body of research shows that direct and vicarious negative contacts with police—including high levels of arrests and a perceived inability to control violence—often have the unintended outcome of alienating members of these over-policed communities.<sup>4</sup> Research also shows that in the aftermath of police violence, 911 calls from Black neighborhoods go down while violence goes up.<sup>5</sup> Black men are at the highest risk of being victims of gun violence, the most likely to be arrested for illegal possession of a gun, and the largest proportion of those incarcerated.<sup>6</sup>

Many police departments actively seek to address gun violence by “taking guns off the street” through patrol and investigative strategies intended to maximize gun recoveries and arrests. Beyond that, police officers regularly encounter illegal guns in the course of their routine work. There is little latitude in the moment when an officer encounters a firearm; an arrest—and all that follows—seems inevitable. Few could argue about the high-stakes nature of this moment, and the need for an immediate, safe resolution, but most officers (and most departments) feel that they have no options available to them, other than to confiscate the weapon and put its possessor into custody.<sup>7</sup>

Policing guns is a complicated problem for police departments and communities that want to minimize the use of arrest, incarceration, and harmful contact with the criminal justice system, while also producing high levels of public safety. However, new thinking and new approaches are being pioneered by innovative police departments across the country. Contrary to the belief that policing guns must rely heavily on stops, arrests, and large-scale enforcement actions, some departments are creating a greater array of options for how to manage guns and gun violence.

The National Network for Safe Communities (NNSC) is an action-research center based at John Jay College of Criminal Justice that develops, takes to scale, and supports cities in implementing evidence-based approaches to reducing violence and enhancing the effectiveness and legitimacy of public safety institutions. For more than 20 years, NNSC has applied an action-research process to a range of apparently intractable public safety problems, with great success. In recent years, NNSC has been studying the ways in which law enforcement can expand their use of discretion around guns and gun violence to reduce harm to communities while also improving public safety. The results of that work can be found in this toolkit and its accompanying document, *Rethinking Law Enforcement Responses to Guns and Gun Violence: Elevating Alternatives to Traditional Enforcement Approaches*, which features a broader discussion on the history and use of police discretion.<sup>8</sup>

This toolkit is meant to provide both law enforcement practitioners and advocates **key facts** on the relationship between policing practices and persistent gun violence and **examples of innovative practices** in policing the presence of guns, gun violence, and people at the highest risk. The toolkit then details ways to **support implementation** of these practices and how to **respond to any potential challenges** that might arise.

## II. KEY FACTS ABOUT GUN VIOLENCE

Research into gun violence, and an emerging set of evidence-based practices for addressing gun violence, show that there is a distinctive dynamic associated with that violence, and that traditional policing tactics do not effectively address this dynamic.

### KEY FACTS

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- Small at-risk population
  - Distrust of law enforcement
  - Ineffectiveness of gun recovery strategies
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### SMALL AT-RISK POPULATION

**Gun violence is highly concentrated, not only in cities or neighborhoods, but among small numbers of high-risk people within them.** Gun violence is primarily concentrated in cities, within certain communities of color. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, of the 12,979 firearm homicides in the United States in 2015, 81% occurred in urban areas.<sup>9</sup> Within those cities, Black residents are ten times more likely to be killed by gun violence than white residents, and 14 times more likely than white residents to be injured in a nonfatal shooting.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Black men—who make up less than 7% of the US population—are 52% of the country’s gun homicide victims.<sup>11</sup>

Young men are the most at risk. Gun homicide is the third leading cause of death for children and teens in America,<sup>12</sup> with young men between the ages of 16 and 24 at the highest risk.<sup>13</sup> In 2014, gun homicide was the leading cause of death for black youth ages 15 to 24, making up 48% of all deaths in that group.<sup>14</sup> This risk is not evenly distributed, but rather is extraordinarily concentrated among a small, extremely high-risk group.

**A very small, high-risk population of people heavily involved in active groups and networks will routinely be associated as both victims and perpetrators with over half of all homicides and non-fatal shootings.**<sup>15</sup> An even smaller number will actually be involved in killings and shootings. In addition, gun violence is usually concentrated in a very small area of any given neighborhood—research has found that around half of all incidents of gun violence are concentrated in about 5% of street segments or blocks in any given city.<sup>16</sup>

**Those at highest risk for gun offending are also at the highest risk for victimization.** This dual risk is what scholars call the “victim-offender overlap” and it is again highly connected

to people who are involved with any network or street group.<sup>17</sup> A study that covered five cities found that gang members were more than twice as likely as nongang members to both commit and be victimized by violence, largely due to the continual dangers of group-related retaliation.<sup>18</sup>

### **WHAT IS "HIGH-RISK"?**

Those at the highest risk for gun offending are also at the highest risk for victimization. Where this toolkit refers to "high-risk" people, this means someone with a high likelihood of committing gun violence *and/or* a high risk of becoming a victim.

## **DISTRUST OF LAW ENFORCEMENT**

**Communities with high concentrations of gun violence are also those with a deep distrust of law enforcement.** While this distrust can take many different forms, it is often focused on the idea [that people there are being both over-policed for lower level quality-of-life crimes and under-protected from gun violence.](#)<sup>19</sup> The notion of under-protection is often expressed as a sentiment that the police are not doing enough to effectively curb the violence that is taking place in the communities that they serve.<sup>20</sup> For example, when scholars asked respondents in one community whether they call the police after a shooting incident, they received two consistent responses: "I/we don't ever call the police," and, "Even if I do call, they don't do nothing."<sup>21</sup> In fact, this distrust is so widespread that many community members will consistently not cooperate with the police, report crimes, or even ask the police for help.<sup>22</sup>

[This sense of under-protection, combined with their actual and persistent exposure to violence leads many young men, group and non-group affiliated, to obtain and carry guns rather than rely on the police.](#) Researchers found this notion of self-help to be the most common motivation for gun possession among young men. These men often say that they have decided to own a gun in response to violence in their neighborhoods, or after being a victim of or witnessing gun violence directed toward friends or family members.<sup>23</sup> It is well documented that violence often tends to perpetuate more violence, resulting in a cycle of vendetta ("beef") and retaliation that typifies everyday gun violence.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, traditional police approaches, including some designed to directly address gun violence, can make communities feel over-policed, further damaging police legitimacy. ["Zero tolerance" arrests for low-level offenses, while intended by police to address violence, bring large numbers of residents into the criminal justice system, even while many known shooters are not arrested.](#)<sup>25</sup> Likewise, typical police tactics meant to

confiscate firearms and decrease violence, such as high levels of pretextual vehicle stops or pedestrian stop and frisks, have not been shown to reduce gun violence.<sup>26</sup> Such tactics instead work to alienate communities, as these actions feel invasive and focused on the wrong people.<sup>27</sup> The resulting lack of trust perpetuates unwillingness to cooperate and share information, making it even more difficult to solve shootings in many of these communities.<sup>28</sup>

In 2015, Eric Jones, Chief of Police in Stockton, California, publicly acknowledged this impasse in his community, and stated that [when people do not feel comfortable going to the police, “street justice prevails.”](#)<sup>29</sup> As a result, Chief Jones initiated a trust-building process, featuring an explicit police-community reconciliation process that included a public apology for the department’s previous actions, ongoing listening sessions, training for officers, and concrete policy and practice changes that incorporated feedback from a community advisory board. Officers gained a better understanding of what their community had experienced at the hands of police and what they wanted from police, and trust and public safety improved. Chief Jones noted, [“We have had a big reduction in both homicides and nonfatal shootings. Anonymous tips are up; more people are providing information to the police. We’re solving more cases. Our homicide clearance rate went from around 40 percent in 2017 to 66 percent last year.”](#)<sup>30</sup>

## INEFFECTIVENESS OF GUN RECOVERY STRATEGIES

**Though many police departments rely on “taking guns off the street” as their main preventive approach to gun violence, there is little evidence that these strategies actually reduce violence.** In New York City, as “stop, question, and frisk” stops decreased from their peak of 685,724 in 2011 to 11,629 in 2017, homicides also declined from 515 to 292.<sup>31</sup> In Chicago, the rate of gun recovery was steady between the years of 2013 and 2016, but the homicide rate fluctuated significantly. Most recently, in Philadelphia, 1,584 people were arrested on firearms charges through November 2019—the highest number in five years—while at the same time, the city was seeing its highest levels of shootings that decade.<sup>32</sup> While in no way exhaustive, [such findings and field experience suggest that there is no clear connection between measures taken by police to recover guns and lower levels of gun violence.](#)<sup>33</sup>

Given these facts, it has become clear that even though public safety is a top priority for police departments nationwide, gun violence can be addressed in ways that are more effective and rely less on enforcement. Ideally, they will also strengthen relationships between communities and the police, as they work to reduce violence overall.

## III. ADDRESSING GUN VIOLENCE

Given what the research reveals about the causes and effects of gun violence, police departments have an opportunity to reexamine their approaches. There are a number of alternative methods that law enforcement practitioners can consider using in [policing the presence of guns](#), [policing gun violence dynamics in partnership with communities](#), and [policing people at the highest risk for potentially committing gun violence or being victimized by violence themselves](#). The following methods emerged from NNSC's own research and from its two working sessions on the topic.

### THREE FOCUS AREAS FOR ADDRESSING GUN VIOLENCE

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- The presence of guns
  - Gun violence dynamics
  - People at the highest risk of being victimized by and/or committing gun violence
- 

Departments can use innovative techniques to address the presence of guns in communities. While both advocates and police officers want to get guns off the streets, the traditional tactics employed by departments to date have not only been ineffective, they can also “raise havoc in the community.”<sup>34</sup> Policing consultant Bob Wasserman explained,

**“Stop question and frisk, which is not an effective strategy, is one that still is used in many communities... If [police] see someone they think might have a gun, they stop them and try and find out whether they have a gun or not. And often in a pretty offensive and disrespectful manner.”**

**“The community often knows who has guns and is using them but they will always be unwilling to share that information with neighborhood police if tactical officers treat people with disrespect, which they often do.”<sup>35</sup>**



There are ways that departments can design alternative ways of reducing the presence and flow of guns in their communities, in either formal or informal ways, that are less harmful to communities. For example, [departments could develop programs that help officers get consent to search the homes on a voluntary basis](#). The St. Louis Police Department once collaborated with prosecutors to develop a Consent-to-Search program in which community members who knew or suspected that someone in their home—usually a juvenile—had an illegal gun could give police written permission to search for and seize the weapon without charging anyone with illegal possession of a firearm.<sup>36</sup> [Departments can also work with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms \(ATF\) in trying to address trafficking and the supply-side of the market](#). The ATF has established Crime Gun Intelligence Centers (CGIC) in several cities to provide state and local law enforcement with access to databases such as the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) that can be used to proactively prevent weapons from entering communities in the first place.

**Departments and advocates can reduce gun violence by engaging with the most affected communities.** [The Los Angeles Police Department and the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles \(HACLA\) partnered to create the Community Safety Partnership \(CSP\), a collaboration meant to address areas of Los Angeles with the highest incidences of gun violence, as well as to handle other forms of violence](#).<sup>37</sup> CSP officers were given long-term assignments in those areas, where they focused on relationship building with community members, while receiving training in conflict resolution, communication, and the history of LAPD in those communities.<sup>38</sup> In the first three years of CSP's operation in the Watts neighborhood, both violent crime and arrests decreased by 50%.<sup>39</sup>

NNSC's own Group Violence Intervention (GVI), an evidence-based approach,<sup>40</sup> can be adopted by departments to tackle the problem of gun violence. [GVI, which involves establishing a partnership between law enforcement, social service providers, and community figures, is specifically crafted to address the concentration of gun violence among groups and networks](#). Central to GVI is the "call-in": a meeting during which law enforcement representatives (including police officers), influential community members, and social service providers speak directly to members of active, violent street groups.<sup>41</sup> These speakers communicate a credible, moral message against violence, a credible law enforcement message about the consequences of further violence, and a genuine offer of help for those who want it, then urge the people present to spread the message back to their associates.

Departments can implement projects that engage with the people at the highest risk for both being victimized by and/or committing gun violence. One example is Chicago's Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) program, which employed "offender notification forums," for probationers and parolees who had already been convicted of gun crimes and who were involved in gangs or street groups.<sup>42</sup> The forums provided messages from law enforcement officers about the legal risks of gun possession, from service providers about opportunities for help and support, and from former gang members who demonstrated through their own experience that change was possible.

Similarly, NNSC's "custom notifications" enable quick, tactical, direct communication with specific high-risk group members. These notifications articulate that the group members are valued members of the community, give individualized information about their legal risk, and offer opportunities for help.

Departments can also work with "interventionists" and/or street outreach workers, as the LAPD has done for many years. After violent incidents, these workers can calm tensions and prevent retaliation.<sup>43</sup> In New York City, the Mayor's Office to Prevent Gun Violence's Crisis Management System sends teams of community-based "violence interrupters" to de-escalate potentially violent conflicts and make an effort to connect those involved to services.<sup>44</sup> By building trust, these workers are often able to effectively intervene in brewing conflicts to shut them down, often without direct police involvement.<sup>45</sup>

What follows are concrete steps law enforcement practitioners and advocates can take to better approach and respond to guns and gun violence:

## PRACTITIONERS

- Focusing resources or making connections in order to disrupt gun trafficking and the supply-side of the gun market, by collaborating with advocates and using both traditional and newer forms of intelligence (i.e., connecting with ATF, creating databases that share information about guns with other cities, etc.)
- Reviewing incidents of gun violence with frontline officers and parole or probation personnel for any high-risk group member involvement or motive, and connection to any prior violence
- Institutionalizing methods to identify, in as close to real time as possible, the very small number of people at immediate high risk for committing and/or being victimized by gun violence
- Developing coordinated law enforcement, community, and social service strategies to protect, support, and deter those at the highest risk
- Giving the community access to data on arrests, gun recovery rates, and the associated rates of gun violence
- Supporting and working with interventionists, street outreach workers, and service providers
- Requesting the voluntary consent of residents in order to recover guns from their homes

## ADVOCATES

- Requesting that the police department consult with advocates as they design their strategic plan and consider different practices
- Requesting data from the department regarding arrests, gun recovery rates, and the associated rates of gun violence
- Articulating a commitment to gun violence prevention while presenting the facts about the ineffectiveness of traditional enforcement approaches
- Encouraging state or local officials and police to implement focused deterrence strategies, particularly those that rely on community partnership
- Requesting funding for street outreach workers who can de-escalate conflicts and offer services to those at the highest risk
- Articulating the roles of fear, victimization, trauma, and the lack of police legitimacy in driving gun violence, including the voices of those at the highest risk

## IV. SUPPORTING ALTERNATIVES TO TRADITIONAL ENFORCEMENT

Although it is generally believed that arrest is the only outcome when police encounter a gun during a stop or in a home; in practice, some departments are using a wider range of options. During NNSC's working sessions, front-line practitioners noted two major themes that were driving their evolving understandings of, and approaches to, gun possession:

1. **There is a very small number of people at high-risk of engaging in violence in their communities at any given point in time.**
2. **Even many people who possess or carry illegal guns are unlikely to engage in violence.**

Practitioners recommended that policing respond to community norms and expectations, but even when a community expects "zero tolerance" for illegal guns, this does not necessarily mean a punitive approach to all people who possess firearms. Encountering a gun requires *some kind of effective response*, not necessarily an arrest.<sup>46</sup> An arrest can derail someone's life and further damage police legitimacy without creating any benefit to public safety, particularly when the person arrested is known by their community not to be violent.

**As a result of these understandings, some working session participants reported that they allow front-line officers to elect not to arrest when they encounter a gun and it seems safe and appropriate.** While these practices around guns are informal, the officers using them are seeing results and spreading the lessons to others. Departments may want to consider developing these patterns of decision-making into more formal guidelines tailored to their communities.

What follows are some concrete examples of officers responding to firearm possession with minimal negative impact on members of the community, while also preserving public safety:

## **TAKING THE TIME TO UNDERSTAND WHY A NON-VIOLENT JUVENILE HAD A GUN AT HOME**

In Kalamazoo, Michigan, School Resource Officers (SROs) report to the city's Community Police Unit, and officers learned from a student that his brother had a gun at home. Sergeant David Juday sent officers to the house to speak with the mother and the juvenile. The student said he had found the gun in an alley and taken it home. He told the officers that because of a culture of not calling the police and his fear that he would be treated unfairly as a Latino youth, he had not reported it. He had no record and police did not think he posed a threat. In this particular case, Sergeant Juday filed the recovered firearm as a "found weapon," but explained to the family that the youth could have been charged with criminal weapon charges.<sup>47</sup>

## **RECOVERING A GUN FROM A HOME WITH THE HELP OF A FAMILY MEMBER**

In New Haven, Connecticut, Assistant Chief Karl Jacobson (a lieutenant at the time) met with a woman whose grandson was group-involved. Chief Jacobson told the woman that if she ever found a gun in her home, he would remove it with no questions asked, and without making an arrest (as long as the gun did not test back to a homicide or shooting). Eight months later, the grandmother called Chief Jacobson, and he went to the home and recovered the weapon while her grandson was not home. The gun did not test back to a crime, and no arrest was made. This earned the grandmother's trust, and she felt comfortable calling Chief Jacobson the next time she suspected her grandson was involved in potential violence.<sup>48</sup>

## **DECLINING TO FINE OR ARREST A NON-VIOLENT PERSON FOR AN UNREGISTERED GUN**

In summer 2019, Lieutenant Nichole Greene (a sergeant at the time) conducted a vehicle stop in Fort Myers, Florida. The vehicle's driver was a young man who had an expired license and registration, empty marijuana bags in the car, and a gun in his glove compartment. While speaking to the man, Lieutenant Greene learned that he could not renew his license or registration because he was unemployed and had little money. He was unknown to law enforcement, and she had no reason to suspect that he planned to use the firearm to commit a crime. While she could have issued thousands of dollars in summonses and arrested the man, she decided that, because his problems stemmed from a lack of money, fines would only further derail his life. Instead, Lieutenant Greene gave the man a warning, provided him with information on safe and legal firearm carrying, and had him call someone with a valid license to drive his vehicle home.<sup>49</sup>

## TAKING THE GUN FIRST AND ARRESTING LATER (IF NECESSARY)

Even when an officer knows they have options short of arrest, they may not have all of the information they need to make an informed decision in the moment, or to make an arrest in that moment effective. In some jurisdictions, arrests do not mean much in terms of immediate consequences. As Captain Ersie Joyner (now retired from the Oakland Police Department) noted, “In the Bay Area, you can arrest the guy for a gun and he can be out in four hours.”<sup>50</sup> Sergeant Greene reported that in her jurisdiction, prosecutors have ten days to bring a charge following an arrest, after which, if they do not have enough evidence, the person is released and the case is dropped.<sup>51</sup> Delaying an arrest gives police time to determine whether one is necessary, and to build a case if it is.

When officers are uncertain, they can choose to recover a gun and then learn more about the weapon and the person they obtained it from. For example, a gun can be tested for DNA and checked against information in the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) to see if it has been used in a crime. Police can also obtain more information about the person from other officers who may have the best assessment of someone’s likeliness to engage in violence. [These practices can reduce unneeded arrests that might damage public trust, while making the arrests that do occur more effective.](#) Sergeant Greene reported that her pattern of bringing fewer, stronger cases to her prosecutor’s office has even led to an improved working relationship between their units.

## V. CREATING DEPARTMENTAL STRUCTURES THAT SUPPORT THESE NEW METHODS

For police departments seeking to adopt alternative methods of addressing gun violence, leadership and management structures that support these core practices are key. In particular, departments can establish values in ways that build legitimacy with the public, guide decision making internally, and pave the way for successful partnerships. Good management can spread effective practices through the department and allow them to grow and thrive over time.

### VALUES SETTING AND OTHER LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

Police executives and command staff can transform the ways in which a department responds to guns and gun violence in their communities from the top down. Creating a public statement that outlines the department's vision and values can help both officers and the communities they serve understand new responses to gun violence. In creating this statement, executive leaders can use their authority and leverage [to provide clear guidance on the departmental mission and values, along with expectations for how officers can adhere to them](#). By making a public commitment to accountability and departmental goals and values, law enforcement executives and departments can enhance legitimacy, guide policy, and lay the groundwork for stronger partnerships with other agencies and the community.

**Many police departments have values statements, but have difficulty showing officers how to connect departmental values to their work on the ground.** Police executives can explain how day-to-day policing connects to the department's goals. For example, if a department's goal is to prevent gun violence while allowing the community to flourish, officers should not make unnecessary arrests and remove men them from the community, but instead use approaches that defuse situations without need for an arrest.<sup>52</sup>

## REINFORCING VALUES WITH AWARDS

An officer in Burlington, Vermont had his weapon drawn at a robbery suspect who was driving towards him. While it would have been lawful for the officer to shoot at the suspect, as the vehicle approached, he realized that could identify the driver and knew where he could find him. The officer also considered the bystanders who could be injured and ultimately chose to jump out of the way—instead of firing his weapon—and later made a safe arrest of the suspect. Chief Brandon del Pozo gave the officer a major departmental award because he chose to put the sanctity of human life first.

Senior level officials can establish effective lines of communication with prosecutorial offices, other city agencies, advocates, and community members, in order to ensure that they are listening to the appropriate parties and receiving the support that they need. Actively sharing information with other offices can sometimes enable community-based, non-law enforcement workers to intervene and act to prevent gun violence without a need for police intervention. Departments can also advocate for funding for programs that ensure public safety and reduce the demand for police responses—such as street outreach work and reentry services—to their local government. As Michael-Sean Spence, from the nonprofit organization Everytown for Gun Safety, said,

**“We see police chiefs and sheriffs as some of the strongest lobbies out there. And if we can get police chiefs to go to their mayor and say ‘You need to invest into social services, so our load is a little bit lighter,’ that’s what they should be doing.”**

Advocates can build relationships within the local police department and city government and then leverage those relationships to ensure that a vision—as well as its implementation—adequately reflects what is important to the community. Advocates can also create awareness around new initiatives that are thriving nationally and those that have seen the best results in comparable communities. Finally, advocates can partner with police in advocating not only for a rework of police priorities, but also those of prosecutorial offices and other city agencies.



## PRACTITIONERS

- Making a public statement about the department's mission and values (i.e., having it posted on the department's website, published in local news outlets, or distributed to local advocacy groups and other stakeholders)
- Including in the statement the department's commitment to fair and impartial policing; a commitment to establishing and maintaining trust and relationships within the community; the importance of transparency; the goal of preventing gun violence, while still respecting, serving, and protecting the community; and the steps to getting to its goal (i.e., fewer arrests, privileging interventions that diffuse situations, partnering with local prosecutors, engaging with the community)
- Having the executive staff of the department publicly commit itself to upholding the tenets in the statement; incorporating it into the department's official policies
- Designing strategic plans that codify successful practices to ensure continuity after personnel changes in the department
- Advocating for city, state, or national funding for programs such as victim services, street outreach work, and reentry services, that reduce the demand for police responses
- Issuing public statements in support of new city, state, or national initiatives
- Forming effective lines of communication with other city agencies and prosecutorial offices, to create alignment on approaches to guns and gun violence
- Partnering with municipal and social service agencies to create a strategy for non-law enforcement responses to incidents, where appropriate

## ADVOCATES

- Requesting that the department consistently meet with advocates and community members when formulating a mission statement and discussing its implementation plan
- Researching and learning about new initiatives that are thriving in other communities, and regularly meeting with police executives to explore incorporating some of those initiatives into present practices
- Requesting that the department provide documentation of how its mission statement is being implemented, and is responsive to inquiries made by the advocacy community

- Partnering with law enforcement executives to advocate for funding that is needed for other services in the city
- Partnering with law enforcement executives in presenting prosecutorial offices with information and data to support the use of different methods in handling guns and gun violence (and to make any divergence of priorities public)
- Working with non-police and non-law enforcement agencies to build gun violence prevention into law enforcement's missions and operations, guided by evidence-based practice

## MANAGEMENT AND TRAINING

Within police departments, management and training help officers understand how their supervisors expect them to use and internalize the department's values and practices. [The methods used for officer evaluation, rewards, management, and training provide a means by which a department can bring its vision and values to its front line.](#) Supervisors can make it clear that there will not be a penalty for choosing not to arrest, as long as the officer can explain their decision reasonably. As Captain Ersie Joyner said, "For me, number one, I've always just set the tone that they don't work for me. They work with me. So, I've created an environment that's a team. I made it very clear to them that although at times I may be the final decision maker, when time permits, this is going to be a group thing, especially as it relates to gun violence."<sup>53</sup>

**Departments can incentivize positive community contacts and smart decisions through recognition, awards, and overtime pay.** Officers who joined LAPD's CSP program were given a promotion of two ranks, signaling the importance and prestige of the initiative to the department.<sup>54</sup>

According to Inspector Cecilia Ashe of Wilmington, Delaware, it is important to show officers that what they are doing is working and to give them credit for that success, particularly when they are skeptical about change:

**"When we deploy a crime reduction strategy, when we give the officers the mission, we have to go back to the boots on the ground, and say, 'You led us to this. Your actions as a police officer created this success.'"**

For example, an officer who gets intelligence about a planned shooting and uses an enforcement action to take the intended target off the street temporarily has prevented violence even without recovering a gun. "Because for the cop that works the street, they need to know, 'How am I making it better? How am I affecting gun violence every day?'" said Inspector Ashe.<sup>55</sup>

**It is important that departments create the time and space for robust training, not only on policing guns and gun violence, but on skills and topics that help police work with communities.** Training can support both new and experienced officers in integrating the values of a department into their practices and learning how to make decisions around guns and gun violence. It can also give officers the necessary context for their relationships

with the community, such as in Los Angeles, where officers in the CSP program received training from the Los Angeles Urban Peace Institute on the history of LAPD's community relationships, focusing on racially unjust practices that created persistent mistrust of the department.<sup>56</sup>

**When one unit has success after adopting new practices and mindsets, other officers should be given the chance to learn from them.** The Fort Myers Police Department's GVI Unit brings in other teams to train with them and show them why their techniques work, allowing those practices and values to proliferate within the department.<sup>57</sup> **Better community relationships are harder to achieve when the public sees conflicting actions and styles from different officers in the same department.** "You set up an expectation within your agency, saying, 'This unit here is community policing.' When we have 315 officers in our department and 20 officers make up a community policing unit, we're sending mixed signals to our officers. If what we are trying to do as an agency is create a culture to encourage community engagement, then we expect all 315 officers to engage in community policing, not just 20," said Inspector Cecilia Ashe.<sup>58</sup>

**Law enforcement executives can create a culture that sparks innovation.** In addition to formal training, departments can consider creating a means for police officers to engage with their peers on a continual basis to share experiences and practices from the field. This can provide officers with an opportunity to learn from each other, internalize more effective ways of managing various scenarios, and innovate by building on each other's knowledge. This kind of interaction can also help establish the behavioral norms and values that can drive "pragmatic improvisation," and create better outcomes in the moment-to-moment encounters involving guns and gun violence that officers face.

## PRACTITIONERS

- Creating space for officers to learn from each other by debriefing real-life scenarios and talking through the decisions they made
- Using supervisory meetings to review decision-making, especially after incidents involving guns and/or gun violence
- Making clear that officers have a range of options when handling situations, and that as long as they can explain how a decision was intended to further the department's mission, supervisors will support them
- Paying overtime to officers for participating in call-ins, custom notifications, community meetings, and other outreach
- Including participation in call-ins and custom notifications, as well as the officers' number of positive community contacts, as part of reviews and promotional criteria
- Rewarding officers for community engagement activities through both official awards and informal recognition, and creating performance review criteria that capture these elements
- Including scenario-based sessions in the training curriculum, which emphasize de-escalation techniques as well as options short of immediate arrest
- Discussing a critical decision-making model in the training, so officers can learn how to best respond to distinct situations
- Including modules on topics such as the historical contexts that lead to gun violence and the consequences of arrest and incarceration for people in their communities
- Providing officers with examples of how to incorporate empathy, respect, and conflict resolution skills into interactions with people in the communities they serve
- Consulting with the advocacy community on the training's topics, inviting members of the community in to speak about their experiences and perceptions of police, or to participate in and give feedback on scenario training
- When one unit is doing something well (focused deterrence, building community relationships) giving other units the opportunity to learn from them
- Creating a program that allows officers to share their experiences in the field with other officers and discuss their decision-making processes

- Holding informal after-action discussions, in which involved officers explain the specific actions they did or did not take, and receive feedback from their supervisors and other officers

## ADVOCATES

- Inquiring about management and training practices by requesting formal meetings with the department and updating them about the strength of officers' engagement with community members
- Providing consultation to the department on training topics
- Identifying members of the community to speak about their experiences and perceptions of police as part of a training module, or to participate in and give feedback on scenario training
- Helping police agencies recognize and address the impact of victimization, fear, and trauma on officers

## VI. COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITIES

The strategies that have proven to be the most effective in reducing gun violence rely on trust and healthy partnerships between the police and their communities. As policing consultant Bob Wasserman said,

**“Engagement is not just having the police go and say, ‘Hi, here’s what’s going on in the neighborhood. I’m your chief or your local captain and here’s what we’re doing. Any questions?’ That’s not collaboration. Collaboration and engagement [are] when you sit at a table as partners and figure out policing priorities and how to jointly go forward. And if the community really gets factored into that, it can have a difference and the community starts to share responsibility for the results.”<sup>59</sup>**

One of the most important things that a department can do as it attempts to build trust in communities with high rates of gun violence is to closely listen to community members and take their feedback seriously. Departments can also be proactive about sharing information with the community, including their overall strategy to address gun violence, how they are measuring success, and whenever possible, details about enforcement actions and individual violent incidents. [Genuine communication can bring community members to a point where they are more willing to call the police, share information, and even take on a role in preventing violence.](#) Retired Deputy Chief Phil Tingirides from the LAPD explained how those relationships formed the basis of CSP:

**“When you have true community engagement, when you have true trust building, when you have a relationship, you now have a working relationship with the community, so they understand [how much and what the police can do](#), how much we really want to be involved in, and how much we think other people or other organizations should be involved in.”<sup>60</sup>**

Educating community members about what police can and cannot do should include **discussing innovative options for gun violence prevention**, such as focused deterrence strategies and ways of recovering firearms without making arrests. Community members who want to prevent violence may go to their local governments and police urging an

increase in patrol presence and traditional policing methods. Police and advocates can educate them about the range of more effective options and the ways in which police are willing to respond to and partner with the community to reduce gun violence. All of these tactics can be done in conjunction with the department's policing of gun violence through community engagement. Whether it is through one-on-one meetings or at community events, [both police leadership and front-line officers must be willing to hear community concerns while avoiding defensiveness in the process.](#)

**Advocates can help evaluate how effectively the department is building up this critical trust component of its work** by speaking extensively to the public and inviting community members to department-sponsored events that focus on sharing the changes being made to values statements, trainings, and accountability. [Advocates can also help the department understand the reasons behind high levels of distrust in particular neighborhoods and then work collaboratively with the department to develop strategies to address it.](#) Finally, advocates can speak to stakeholders elsewhere in the government and the private sector about the need for a collaborative public safety strategy, and the need to fund these new initiatives.



## PRACTITIONERS

- Committing the department to transparency, sensitivity, and expeditiousness in addressing community members and advocates after a significant enforcement action (a major enforcement action, the arrest of juveniles, etc.)
- Deploying rapid-response teams out into the community after a traumatic event, such as a homicide or an officer-involved shooting, to reassure community members that their safety is a priority and offer resources
- Consistently communicating with community members—especially those immediately affected by a shooting—with updates on the progress of investigations
- Meeting regularly with community members to review and analyze aspects of shootings that can be made publicly available, with a focus on transparency and partnership
- Educating community members about innovative approaches to violence reduction so they can give informed input on the policing they want
- When community members are playing an active role in preventing violence, recognizing the value of their work and their status as leaders in the community, and helping officers to recognize it too
- Joining the advocacy community at public events, where they can speak together about how they want to fulfill the department's stated mission and goals, while listening to what the community wants to see as departmental priorities

## ADVOCATES

- Speaking with police leaders about the benefits of listening and of deeper community engagement
- Bringing community feedback to the department and creating opportunities for partnership
- Identifying community members who are viewed as credible in their neighborhoods and willing to come to the table with police
- Engaging in reconciliation processes with community members, including meetings and listening sessions where issues such as historical harm and distrust of the police are raised
- Developing ways to ensure that the department is transparent with its release of information about both its enforcement and non-enforcement practices when it comes to policing guns and gun violence

- Educating community members about innovative approaches to violence reduction so they can give informed feedback on the policing they want

## VII. COLLABORATION WITH PROSECUTORS

Advocates and practitioners can actively support further collaboration between the various branches of law enforcement that are able to work together on alternative approaches to gun violence and addressing community concerns. By bolstering these partnerships, particularly with prosecutors, they can strengthen the work and the call to change.

Advocates and practitioners should figure out how to best work with prosecutors in calling for new ways to address the presence of guns, gun violence, and the people at highest risk. In many jurisdictions across the country, prosecutors are already playing a key role when it comes to focused deterrence approaches to gun violence. For example, in order for GVI implementation to be truly effective, it needs to have the full participation of both local and state prosecutors. Both positions play a critical role in communicating with the group-involved populations—by delivering the message about the legal consequences of any future actions—while simultaneously supporting alternative responses for the individual. Therefore, it is critical that a program like GVI have a project manager who can ensure that all key stakeholders, including prosecutors, are effectively working together and delivering the same message.

**Police departments and prosecutors can work together on policing gun violence.** Prosecutorial staff can work alongside police leadership to come up with new methods that will increase the community's trust in, as well as the effectiveness of, law enforcement. One approach to this is through concurrent prosecutorial/police mission statements on the need to approach gun violence in new ways. [Where prosecutors don't share this mission, police and advocates can show them the evidence from other prosecutor-led firearms programs that focus on diversion.](#) For example, in 2015, the Circuit Attorney's Office in St. Louis, Missouri was awarded a Department of Justice grant to begin a diversion program that would give certain people arrested on gun charges (generally those without prior convictions, although prosecutors can exercise discretion over the program's enrollment) the option to participate.<sup>61</sup> In the grant application, the Office acknowledged that not everyone in possession of a firearm is violent, writing, ["Evidence in St. Louis indicates that a significant number of individuals who are arrested and charged with illegal gun possession exhibit some characteristics that indicate they do not harbor intent to commit further criminal acts, but rather are in possession of a weapon for a reason such as personal defense, 'style' or peer pressure."](#)<sup>62</sup> Candidates for the St. Louis program are first vetted to, "ensure that they are not part of known crime circles,"

and then are required to plead guilty to the gun charge in order to enter the program.<sup>63</sup> After completing the approximately year-long program, their gun case will be dismissed. Each participant of the program receives customized social services and support, with the goal of keeping them out of prison in the future. Similar diversionary programs for gun crimes exist in both the Philadelphia and the Seattle District Attorneys' offices as well.

**In addition to working together and moving each other in new directions, police can try to make prosecutors' jobs easier when it comes to crimes of gun violence.** By focusing their efforts on the tiny percentage of highest-risk street group members who actually commit gun crimes, the police can bring prosecutors cases that are inherently stronger than ones involving people without the same level of risk who carry a gun in his or her car. [It is critical that police officers let prosecutors know that the desire to improve the overall workings of the criminal justice system is a key motivating factor behind focused deterrence programs, and how prosecutors have a role to play there.](#) Likewise, if police departments allow officers to elect not to arrest—where appropriate—in gun possession cases (or allow officers to wait until they have gathered more information to bring a case), then the police can bring prosecutors those stronger cases as well.

**Advocates can work with prosecutors' offices to make sure that prosecutorial staff have heard the same narratives and detailed experiences of the impact of traditional police tactics in their communities.** In doing so, advocates can call for prosecutorial offices to commit themselves to less harmful methods, such as those involved in focused deterrence strategies. They may even try to see if they can get their prosecutor's offices to pursue the kind of funding that led to innovative changes in places such as St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Seattle. [Finally, advocates can organize public support around the idea that prosecutorial offices should seek diversion or lesser sentences for certain gun crimes, like possession, especially when the crime is committed by someone who is not at high risk for committing gun violence.](#) Advocates can also make sure that that this message—that prosecutors play a significant role in both reducing gun violence and creating social change—gets across not only to prosecutors, but to the media and the public at large.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Even with innovative strategies and the best intentions, policing guns and gun violence will remain a challenge for advocates and law enforcement practitioners who want to minimize the use of arrest, incarceration, and harmful contact with the criminal justice system, while also producing high levels of public safety. However, with the strategies included in this toolkit, those who are committed can begin the task, from changing departmental culture and building up internal structures, to designing the most effective public messaging and developing appropriate responses short of arrest. Ultimately, advocates and practitioners have the ability to learn an enormous amount from one another, as law enforcement shifts away from traditional strategies for policing guns and gun violence, and advocates are increasingly invited to the table to provide input on the violence in their communities. The experiences of dozens of cities have demonstrated the effectiveness of nearly all of the strategies described in this toolkit, and moving forward, NNSC hopes that this toolkit can help make the transition to a new form of policing easier for many more departments and communities and serve as the foundation for continued innovation in the area of policing guns and gun violence.

**The National Network for Safe Communities (NNSC)**, an internationally recognized action-research center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, provides evidence-based, life-saving violence reduction strategies to dozens of communities across America and beyond. NNSC's paradigm-shifting violence reduction work has demonstrated conclusively that even within distressed communities, the overwhelming majority of residents are not dangerous. Rather, there are often a small number of people who commit multiple violent offenses—and they are the same people who are often at the most risk of being victimized themselves. NNSC is therefore committed to utilizing its evidence-based strategies and outreach resources to protect the most vulnerable people residing in the most vulnerable places.

NNSC has achieved this goal in a variety of time-tested ways: by strengthening community norms against violent behavior, communicating directly with high-risk people to deter them from violence, and by enhancing police legitimacy by advising for use of the minimum level necessary for law enforcement actions. We collaborate closely with city governments, law enforcement agencies, community leaders, and outreach and support providers in order to realign official policies and practices with both available evidence and community priorities. In addition to providing strategic advising to jurisdictions implementing these interventions, NNSC also facilitates peer support and collaborative learning opportunities among cities. By bringing together our partner sites, NNSC helps cities learn from one another, address common issues that they all share, and makes these interventions more standard practice across the United States.

This toolkit was prepared with support from **The Joyce Foundation**, a nonpartisan private foundation that invests in public policies and strategies to advance racial equity and economic mobility for the next generation in the Great Lakes region.

With generous support from the Joyce Foundation, NNSC addressed the issue of new methods of decision-making, in terms of law enforcement responses to guns and gun violence, by extensively researching existing law enforcement policies, practices, and programs, conducting interviews with law enforcement leaders and practitioners, academic experts, and advocates, and convening two working sessions at John Jay College of Criminal Justice to further explore the ways in which the use of effective, innovative techniques might be effectively applied to those at the highest risk of being victimized by and/or committing gun violence, and other issues of gun violence in communities.

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Wasserman, National Network for Safe Communities: Discretion Working Session 2, October 16-17, 2019.

<sup>60</sup> Phillip Tingirides, National Network for Safe Communities: Discretion Working Session 2, October 16-17, 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Kevin Flannery, "City prosecutor launches felony diversion program, federal grant will fund innovative response to select first-time gun charges," *The St. Louis American*, October 1, 2015, [http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local\\_news/city-prosecutor-launches-felony-diversion-program-federal-grant-will-fund/article\\_e9bd3c84-6870-11e5-a227-0fc0bca44eea.html](http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local_news/city-prosecutor-launches-felony-diversion-program-federal-grant-will-fund/article_e9bd3c84-6870-11e5-a227-0fc0bca44eea.html)

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.