

DESIGNING EQUITABLE COMMUNITY VIOLENCE INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

With Employment and Workforce Supports

By Melissa Young & Nia West-Bey

CLASP
The Center for Law and Social Policy



On January 4, 2022, the U.S. Department of Labor issued a Training and Employment Notice¹ providing local workforce boards, American Job Centers (AJCs), workforce development partners, and grantees with information on supporting community violence intervention (CVI) strategies that include an employment or workforce component.

In this brief, the Center for Law and Social Policy offers recommendations for supporting the design and implementation of community violence interventions based on research and practice evidence.

BACKGROUND ON COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

Community violence (sometimes called group violence) is interpersonal and can include shootings, stabbings, and other aggravated assaults between individuals not involved in familial or intimate relationships. Community violence differs from other forms of violence where weapons may be used. It often includes young people and is frequently conducted in a public setting. Roughly half of all gun homicides in the United States occur in just 127 cities—comprising less than a quarter of the total U.S. population. Black and brown Americans make up less than a third of the total population, but account for nearly three-quarters of all gun homicide victims in the United States.² Gun violence overwhelmingly harms people in communities that have been economically marginalized.³

Community violence should be understood in the context of a community or neighborhood ecosystem. Neighborhoods with high levels of violence routinely face multiple compounding challenges arising from, and exacerbated by, structural inequity and racist policies, such as segregation; limited availability or access to quality jobs; a lack of safe and affordable housing; lack of affordable, quality health and mental health services; and histories of divestment.⁴

Moreover, significant research on the interactions of place and violence, along with a robust body of evidence, demonstrates the connection between state-sponsored racial segregation and rates of violence today.⁵ For example, an analysis of historically red-lined areas has found that, even after adjusting for the socio-demographic factors, “the same places that were imagined to be areas unworthy of economic investment by virtue of the races, ethnicities, and religions of their residents are more likely to be the places where violence and violent injury are most common almost a century later.”⁶ Often today, these communities are over-policed. The overreach of the criminal legal system, particularly in Black and brown urban communities, results in many people being barred from education, employment, and housing (sometimes for life) as a result of the collateral consequences—sometimes called “permanent punishments”—that follow criminal legal system involvement.⁷

Behind every act of community violence there are families, friends, and communities left to grapple with the aftermath of trauma and, all too often, injury or loss of life. Exposure to violence and the ripple effects of trauma and grief puts enormous strain on families, children, schools, employers, hospitals, government systems, and entire communities. In particular, being a victim of violence in adolescence is associated with a “chain of adversity,” which can compromise academic performance, educational attainment, labor force participation, occupations, and earnings into adulthood.^{8,9}

BENEFITS OF EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS IN CVI PROGRAMS

Domestic and international research demonstrates that community violence, trauma, poverty, and inequality interact and reinforce each other in communities.¹⁰ And yet, implementing evidence-based CVI strategies, particularly those that include employment and workforce supports, can help to reduce gun violence. Research tells us that a functioning labor market (in which everyone who wants to work has a quality job) may be critical to breaking cycles of high unemployment, high crime, and low growth in communities and entire countries.^{11, 12}

The American Rescue Plan Act and other federal employment, training, education, and support resources can help local leaders in developing community violence interventions with employment and support components. As leaders consider advancing such programs, they should design and implement them in a way that aligns with best and promising practices. This brief offers a review of key practices to help community-based organizations, funders, public officials, and others make these efforts most effective, inclusive, and equitable.



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GETTING STARTED: ANCHORS TO SUPPORT IMPACT & EQUITY

Regardless of how CVI programs are designed and implemented these elements are critical for supporting success and focusing on inclusion and equity.

- 1. Designate time to plan and co-design with communities most impacted by community violence.** Quality CVI strategies that include an employment component will require multiple community partnerships with public, nonprofit, and private stakeholders. This requires time to plan and forge deep commitment and trust by partners involved. Additionally, any CVI strategy with an employment component should be co-designed by community stakeholders. Designers should set aside time, allocate resources, and plan to compensate community members as experts. To the extent possible, staff should be members of the community in which the program is serving or located.
- 2. Start small and scale over time.** Implementing these models, especially if they are new to a community, may require program designers and implementers to build new partnerships to address emerging needs or to pivot and redesign elements as the program is implemented. Starting small can help programs and staff identify challenges and adjust program components more nimbly and demonstrate results over time to scale quality programs.
- 3. Create authentic program feedback mechanisms from the start.** One of the keys to developing strong CVI programs that reflect the needs and interests of participants and communities is to create authentic feedback mechanisms. These tools may include opportunities to provide anonymous feedback from program participants and staff. They should be constructed in ways that support staff and leaders in taking action to correct or augment programming, shift course, or address emerging needs. Implementing these feedback mechanisms will require a commitment to transparency and authentic listening and engagement.

4. Invest in staff supports. The work of CVI programming can be emotionally and physically stressful for staff. They often work long hours and are traditionally available to participants around the clock – during the day, in the evenings, and on weekends. Program designs should designate resources for staff to engage in self-care activities and create mechanisms by which staff can have access to additional supports. All staff should have access to training particularly training in trauma informed principles. Organizations should have robust and competitive salaries, paid leave, and other benefit systems in place.

5. Ensure that programs and their policies are steeped in trauma-responsive approaches. A trauma-informed and trauma-responsive approach is an organizational structure that acknowledges the deep impact of trauma on people in a system (including staff). It responds by incorporating education about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices while actively resisting re-traumatization. It's essential that CVI programs are actively incorporating trauma-informed and trauma-responsive strategies into the policies and practices. These efforts should focus on the core elements of trauma-informed approaches, such as fostering environments of empowerment, choice, collaboration, safety, trustworthiness, and peer support—while also addressing cultural, historical, and gender issues.

6. Seek program design support, peer learning, and technical assistance opportunities. Stakeholders do not have to go it alone when designing and building these programs. They should take advantage of existing resources to support design and implementation of these models. Additionally, stakeholders should seek out technical assistance and opportunities to learn with their peers.

PROMISING PROGRAM PRACTICES

Community-based strategies to prevent and address violence are not new, and offices of violence prevention exist in cities nationwide. However, community-based violence interventions blending employment supports operate in only a few cities across the United States. There is much work needed to curb violence by incubating, spreading, and scaling promising practices that include employment and workforce solutions. Doing so will require stakeholders like community-based organizations, public officials, and others to be fully resourced and act with intention to ensure programs are accessible, trauma-informed, healing-centered, and anchored in authentic participant and community engagement as well as cogent leadership.

Below are some key practices to help program designers, implementers, funders, and public officials develop CVI initiatives with confidence and focus on equity and inclusion.

1. Invest in community outreach, building trusting relationships, and relentless engagement strategies.

Community violence is generally perpetrated by a very small number¹³ of people who are often not seeking services offered by public systems. These individuals have also most likely been the victim of violence or witnessed violence themselves. Communities seeking to develop CVI strategies with workforce elements should ensure that strong outreach and engagement elements are a core part of their model.

Outreach and engagement with people most impacted by community violence should be done by and with trusted partners and individuals from the community. In some instances, groups leading CVI efforts have leveraged partnerships with “violence interrupters” and organizations that have a proven track record of addressing community violence since these individuals and organizations often have deep relationships with perpetrators and victims of violence!⁴ Outreach and engagement professionals should be skilled at violence interruption strategies and de-escalation. They should also reside in or know the community where they are working. These professionals are key to building trusting relationships with participants and often practice “relentless engagement” techniques!¹⁵

Moreover, effectively addressing community violence through the design and implementation of employment programs means that workforce professionals may need to challenge assumptions on job readiness. That is, they must be willing, able, and equipped to serve people they might otherwise regard as “not ready” for employment services or even “not employable” through traditional means of assessing readiness to work.

2. Ensure that paid work opportunities are available to all participants.

Research demonstrates that engagement in wage-paid, real work opportunities like subsidized employment or transitional jobs may be a critical component of quality CVI strategies. This is, in part, because paid work opportunities can create a tangible and attractive way to engage people who may not be seeking services in economically marginalized communities. Over time, the job can become an opportunity for individuals to earn income, build relationships, and access other supports. These strategies have demonstrated marked reductions in violence, with particularly strong impacts reducing recidivism for people most at risk of returning to incarceration.^{16, 17, 18}

Subsidized employment is an eligible use of funds for CVI programs under American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, according to guidance¹⁹ from the U.S. Department of the Treasury. This means communities can leverage ARPA funds to implement CVI programs that include subsidized employment, apprenticeship programs, other work-based learning, and transitional jobs programs.

Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education released guidance²⁰ that ARPA funds, including the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund and the Governors’ Emergency Relief Fund, may be used to help students and youth who experience disconnection from education, employment, or training. Leaders can invest such funding in summer and year-round programs that provide job training and work-based learning experience for students, including formerly incarcerated students, and youth who are disconnected and live in communities most impacted by high levels of violence.

Stakeholders must consider best and promising practices to structure these programs so they meet participants’ needs and uphold commitments to equity and inclusion. For example, program models should support structured work environments that are aligned with participants’ interests; create feedback mechanisms between programs and employer partners; and engage participants for as long as necessary. They should also pay a livable wage and adopt “zero exclusion” policies, among other promising practices.²¹



3. Scaffold learning, training, and professional development opportunities.

As described earlier, experiencing community violence in adolescence can cause a “chain of adversity,” i.e., by impeding academic achievement, employment, and earnings in adulthood. CVIs that open doors to education, training, and quality jobs have the potential to break this “chain,” while curbing gun violence, saving lives, and increasing economic mobility.

Leaders should design learning and development goals that align with participants' needs and interests. Additionally, it is essential for leaders to address the difficulty participants may face engaging in full-time training and education without earning income to pay for daily expenses. To prevent this hardship, programs should pay participants for time spent in education and training whenever possible. Or, programs should build partnerships in which participants can simultaneously engage in paid work, alongside their education, training and development.

Here are some promising ideas for supporting learning, training, and professional development:

- Support high school graduation or GED completion opportunities, depending on the participants. Programs can also be prepared to address previously unidentified, unaddressed, or misidentified learning disabilities.^{22 23}
- Develop on-the-job and contextual education, training, and learning opportunities that reinforce the participants' job duties. Doing so can simultaneously address education and job goals. Partnerships with K-12 school systems, community colleges, and higher education systems may be able to support these goals.
- Engage in pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs. These efforts have the potential to support pathways to good jobs for participants over time. Programs can foster these opportunities through partnerships at the local and state level.
- Encourage entrepreneurship through partnerships with micro-lending institutions and linkages with business education supports, small business groups, and small business mentors or coaches. Doing so has the potential to jumpstart participants' career trajectory in ways that align with their interests and goals.
- Partner with artists and spaces where participants can practice or engage in the arts. These practices can be transformational to healing, learning, and development. It is well documented that engagement in the arts—including performance, music, visual arts, theater, literature, dance, and other art forms—can create personal development opportunities, particularly for youth. These avenues can also support healing and positive connections to peers and mentors.^{24, 25}
- Partner with community colleges and institutions of higher education, which can be transformative in supporting participants' education and career goals. Program design should be intentional about including and resourcing higher education and college navigation staff within the program to support participant success. Equally important, programs may partner with institutions that offer chunked or bridge-like educational programming to support student success.

4. Invest in mental and behavioral health supports and partnerships for participants and staff.

Both victims and perpetrators of violence experience high, and often prolonged, levels of trauma and stress that can manifest in mental and behavioral health needs.²⁶ Programs should plan for this upfront. Leaders should also seek to weave these supports into programming through robust partnerships with public mental health systems.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) may be beneficial. However, its long-term benefits are unknown and may have the potential to harm communities of color and people with intersecting identities.²⁷ CBT strategies seem to be most impactful when blended with programs that offer income?²⁸ and they must be structured to be culturally responsive. Program designers, funders, and public system officials should be aware of the tendency of cognitive behavioral approaches to conceptualize a person's problem as dysfunctional cognitions when they are a consequence of unacceptable environmental conditions.

CVI programs should also include peer support providers, recovery coaches, and community health professionals on staff.²⁹ In addition, they should maintain partnerships with psychologists, physicians, and social workers to help identify and support mental health concerns and support participant needs. The high levels of trauma and distrust participants experience can be supported through practices drawn from restorative justice principles and approaches.³⁰ Designing community violence interventions with an explicit trauma-informed lens is essential for the program's success. Finally, it is paramount that all staff develop competency for meeting the mental health needs of young people.

5. Develop strong housing and legal services partnerships.

Two of the most common challenges that CVI program participants face is housing instability and a need for legal services or representation. Both of these factors can hurt their success in employment, education, and training. As CVI programs consider partnerships that help participants connect to services and wrap-around support, CLASP recommends that they include relationships with the local [Continuum of Care](#). As a designated housing and homelessness resource hub, these entities can support access to housing services. On-site and integrated legal services are also highly recommended to support representation and navigation of the legal system. Additionally, child care and health care needs often surface during program participation. Addressing these gaps in services may require other partnerships in the community.

SNAP AND SNAP EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING

Program experience indicates that many participants in community violence intervention strategies may be eligible for nutrition assistance through the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Enrolling participants in SNAP may also open the door to leveraging SNAP Employment & Training funds for subsidized employment and other qualifying worker supports. Program designers and operators will want to be mindful of several factors in the decision to leverage this funding stream. This [brief](#) offers recommendations for balancing these decisions.

6. Be prepared to educate employers about how trauma can manifest in the workplace and how to respond.

Regardless of the mode of providing access to employment supports, stakeholders and program operators must understand and be able to communicate the signs and signals of trauma and how it can manifest in the workplace. Many of the common ways people respond to trauma include withdrawal, agitation, or difficulty concentrating. Among other responses, employers can view these actions as behavioral or attitude problems that can get workers reprimanded or fired. In the case of CVI programs, nearly all participants will have faced traumatic experiences. Many may have had multiple or compounded traumatic experiences. In particular, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention alongside the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Center for Trauma-Informed Care have developed principles for trauma-informed care that may also be applied to the workplace and employer policies. These include a focus on safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment and choice; and a recognition of cultural, historic, and gender issues.³¹ For CVI program designers and operators, it may be critical to support employers in seeing and modifying, as appropriate, their workplace policies and practices via a trauma-informed lens.

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CONCLUSION

For many people and communities across the country, community violence represents a devastating and deadly public health crisis. The good news is that we have tools to curb violence and break cycles of trauma, poverty, and inequity. Leveraging new and existing federal resources to build community violence intervention solutions is one critical piece of the puzzle. These approaches should be incubated and scaled in communities nationwide.

And as noted at the beginning of this brief, community violence should be understood in the context of a community or neighborhood ecosystem often burdened with histories of divestment and the collateral impacts of structural inequity and racist policies. Addressing the root causes of community violence requires a commitment to addressing structural inequity. Systemic solutions like safe and affordable housing, access to quality jobs, and health and mental health supports, among others, are necessary to ensure that people can thrive.

The Department of Labor's guidance³² and investments by the federal government in CVI strategies that include workforce and employment components is a welcome and necessary element in addressing community violence across the country. This brief is intended to support community-based organizations, funders, public officials, and others in designing and implementing equitable community violence interventions based on research and practice evidence. We believe doing so can have lasting positive impacts for individuals and communities.

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