

Reducing Community Violence in the Near-Term: What should be done and why some efforts are not more successful

A Brief Summary

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years, staff and researchers at CPSI have been part of many discussions in the community about the problem of violence. The most common questions across all of those conversations have been: What should the community do and why have we not seen more success in addressing this problem? These are, of course, complicated questions that deserve careful and thoughtful consideration. At the same time, the complexity can overwhelm and frustrate the search for practical solutions to the problem. In this paper, our goal is to provide succinct responses to these questions based on our assessment of the state of knowledge about community violence. Our hope is that this approach can support the community's search for practical responses to the problem of community violence.

Communities across the country exhibit wide-ranging differences in levels of violence, and in recent years, some have accomplished significant reductions in violence by implementing interventions which are supported by evidence of their effectiveness. The practices used for reduction of community violence have changed dramatically in the United States over the past two decades. The material below was developed from CPSI's ongoing review of violence reduction efforts in cities across the country. Here the focus is on efforts that are not exclusively law enforcement based. The goal of this paper is to provide a brief summary of key issues and to encourage further examination of local violence reduction efforts.

Five Things, Beyond Policing, that a Community Should Do to Reduce Violence

1. Develop and support a local organization, in or out of government, whose ongoing mission is the reduction of violence in the near term. Its specific charge should be to implement and oversee non-enforcement based interventions and to organize the community to reduce violence.

2. Produce a specific plan for near-term violence reduction which includes regular assessments of program effectiveness and regular reports to the community. Update and revise the plan regularly.
3. Do the things that have the highest probability of reducing violence. Implement evidence based interventions. Strategies meeting this criterion are described and reviewed at www.CrimeSolutions.gov.
4. Focus intervention efforts on individuals and/or groups with a high potential for serious violence in the near future based on their records of previous violent behavior.
5. Focus interventions in geographic areas where violence is concentrated.

Ten Reasons Why the Community Has Not Been More Successful in Reducing Violence?

Although we can identify potentially productive paths for efforts to reduce community violence in Rochester, it is also true that implementation presents its own challenges. The violence problem is not isolated from other problems facing American cities including problems of poverty, race relations, and patterns of urban and suburban development. Those are part of the context in which implementation must occur. In this section, we consider implementation broadly by examining how that context seems to have shaped some violence reduction efforts in the Rochester community. The discussion below is based on long-term observation but does not represent findings from any specific empirical study.

Below is a list of nested factors, like Russian nested dolls, in which number one (1) below is the center-most and, arguably, the least important factor. Each of the following factors, in order from lowest to highest, is suggested as a factor which helps explain the one above it.

1. We don't consistently do the things that have the highest probability of reducing violence. Why?
2. Because we have not adopted specific, evidence based interventions. Why?
3. Because we lack an organizational infrastructure to adopt, manage, implement and sustain such interventions. Why?
4. Because no one has taken the responsibility to develop and support such an organization. Why?
5. Because we lack (a) public and/or (b) private funding needed to support and encourage the appropriate leadership. Why?

6. Because there are (a) limited funds and insufficient priority for this problem in the competition among problems for public funds. And, (b) because we have generally risk-averse private funding sources, including foundations and businesses. Why?
7. Because controversy and conflict at the community level, which is associated with race, class, poverty and urban/suburban divisions, immobilize the community on this subject. Why?
8. Because of the role these conflicts play in the political, economic and social life of the community. Why?
9. Because there has been a general failure to recognize that violence results in consequences and costs which are shared across the community at-large. That, in turn, has led to a failure to find a common interest in reducing those costs and consequences. Why?
10. Because the culture in and beyond the community has failed to establish a general sense of common community interest.

Conclusion

There is growing evidence for the efficacy of specific violence reduction and prevention strategies. By adopting those, some communities are making significant advances in this area while others are stagnant or falling behind. It is important to note that the issues raised above are not uncommon across American cities. It is also clear that some communities have succeeded in structuring their response to violence in a manner that overcomes these limitations or at least mitigates their impact. In additional working papers, we will continue to explore organizational structures and programs that are used in other communities to support the reduction of community violence.