



SAVING LIVES, STOPPING VIOLENCE: THE ST. LOUIS REGION’S “PLAN TO PLAN” FOR VIOLENCE REDUCTION

January 10, 2024

From December 4th through December 8th, 2023, a diverse collection of stakeholders gathered to discuss, deliberate, and decide on new strategies to address elevated rates of lethal and potentially lethal violence in the St. Louis region.¹²

Organized by the Center for the Study and Practice of Violence Reduction (VRC) and the East-West Gateway Council of Governments (EWGCOG), participants engaged in a Practicum on Partnership-Based Violence Reduction. Participants received a series of briefings by leading anti-violence researchers and practitioners on the most effective local anti-violence strategies currently available.³ Following the briefings, participants deliberated and produced a draft “plan to plan,” memorialized below, to help guide the region’s anti-violence efforts. A “plan to plan” is merely a starting point – an actual plan will be finalized based on consultation with additional stakeholders, including but not limited to directly impacted individuals and groups.

The Problem: Violence in the St. Louis Region

The St. Louis region’s homicide rate is among the highest in the United States and is over double the U.S. metro average. Last year, 360 people violently lost their lives in the region.⁴ The human toll of these tragedies is incalculable – there is no way to calculate the value of a young life cut short or the cost of a family’s grief. The economic impact of such violence can be estimated, however, and the costs are staggering.

In 2022, homicides alone cost the region approximately \$3.6 billion in criminal justice and medical costs, lost wages, increased insurance premiums, reduced tax revenues, and diminished property values.⁵ According to Greater St. Louis Inc. and the Regional Business Council: “The St. Louis, MO-IL metro area has globally significant assets and strengths yet has struggled economically... crime and public safety are a leading barrier to... success.”⁶

¹ Throughout this report, “region” refers to the East-West Gateway region, which includes the city of St. Louis and St. Louis, Jefferson, Franklin, and St. Charles counties in Missouri and Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties in Illinois.

² For a list of participants, see Appendix A.

³ For a list of instructors, see Appendix B.

⁴ The Need for a Regional Strategy to Reduce Homicides. May 2023. Greater St. Louis, Inc.

⁵ Every homicide costs society between \$10-19 million in direct and indirect social costs. Thomas Abt. Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence – And a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets. 2019. Basic Books.

⁶ The Need for a Regional Strategy, Greater St. Louis, Inc.

While the social and economic impacts of violence are felt broadly, a recent analysis of homicides performed by the VRC, EWGCOG, and the National Network for Safe Communities (NNSC) indicates that serious violent offenses are concentrated among a small number of people and places across the region.⁷

In 2022, 62 percent of regional homicides occurred in the City of St. Louis (the City), and over 90 percent of homicides happened in either the City, St. Louis County, or St. Clair County.⁸ Across these jurisdictions, violent crime clusters among micro-locations known as “hot spots.” These locations, often as small as a few city blocks, account for a disproportionate share of the region’s homicides and shootings.

Serious violence also concentrates among a small number of individuals and groups. Criminally involved groups made up just 0.16 percent of the region’s population yet were likely involved in more than 30 percent of recent homicides. According to the analysis, murder victims and suspects had nearly identical demographic characteristics as well as similar criminal histories. Homicide victims and suspects were mostly male (83 percent), Black (89 percent), and adults (31 years of age on average). They also had significant prior contact with the criminal justice system, with an average of 6.5 previous felony cases and 13 prior arrests.

Community violence, i.e. violence that happens in community settings, accounted for 72 percent of total homicides according to the analysis. These incidents included personal disputes, drug-related disputes, group-related disputes, and robberies. This violence does not respect jurisdictional boundaries – for instance, of the 135 homicides that took place in the City of St. Louis between September 2022 and June 2023, 30 percent of them involved at least one victim or suspect from outside city limits.

Finally, it is important to observe that studies have shown that rates of violence in the region correlate directly to levels of poverty, racial segregation, and patterns of divestment in communities of color.⁹ The city of St. Louis is “one of the most racially and economically segregated cities in the country” and, out of the 50 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S., the region is ranked as the seventh most segregated. While the aim of this effort is to provide the region with immediate relief, reducing violence directly and quickly over a period of a few years, attention must be paid to these long-term correlates of crime and violence.

⁷ Homicide Analysis – St. Louis Region. December 2023. Center for the Study and Practice of Violence Reduction.

⁸ The Need for a Regional Strategy, Greater St. Louis, Inc.

⁹ Addressing Community Violence in the City of St. Louis: Existing Strategies, Gaps, and Funding Opportunities. 2022. Giffords Center for Violence Intervention.

The Solution: Anti-Violence Strategies that are Focused, Balanced, and Fair

During the Practicum, participants were introduced to key principles and programs for violence reduction, based on the latest research and data.¹⁰

Focus. In U.S. cities, half of all murders typically involve less than .06 percent of the city's population.¹¹ Just 4 percent of a city's geography often accounts for half of total crime.¹² Strategies that focus on these high-risk people and places typically outperform more generalized anti-crime approaches.¹³

Balance. There is significant empirical evidence for "soft" anti-violence approaches that emphasize supports and services. At the same time, solid research indicates that "tough" approaches featuring strong law enforcement can also be effective.¹⁴ Prevention and intervention strategies divert potentially violent individuals while law enforcement deters or incapacitates persistent violent offenders. To date, no successful American city has adopted an exclusively "soft" or "tough" approach to violence reduction – balanced strategies featuring both are required.

Fairness. Rates of community violence are closely connected to the perceived legitimacy of the criminal justice system.¹⁵ To be successful and sustainable, anti-violence strategies must be seen as fair by those most impacted by them. Anti-violence policymaking must be inclusive, giving impacted individuals and groups a voice in the process.

Practicum participants also explored leading anti-violence strategies, including focused deterrence, place-based policing strategies, fatal and nonfatal shooting investigations, street outreach, cognitive behavioral theory, and environmental crime prevention. Each of these strategies is supported by a strong base of empirical evidence indicating that, when properly implemented, they can reduce violence and save lives. Participants examined each strategy to see whether they would fit the unique circumstances of the region and discussed how they might be customized to meet the region's specific needs.

¹⁰ For a list of Practicum sessions, see Appendix C.

¹¹ Stephen Lurie et al. The Less Than 1%: Groups and the Extreme Concentration of Urban Violence. November 2018. National Network for Safe Communities.

¹² David Weisburd. The law of crime concentration and the criminology of place. 2015. Criminology.

¹³ Abt, Bleeding Out.

¹⁴ Thomas Abt and Christopher Winship. What Works in Reducing Community Violence: A Meta-Review and Field Study. 2015. United States Agency for International Development.

¹⁵ Andrew Papachristos et al. Why do criminals obey the law? The influence of legitimacy and social networks on active gun offenders. 2012. Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology; David Kirk and Andrew Papachristos. Cultural mechanisms and the persistence of neighborhood violence. 2011. American Journal of Sociology.

A New Anti-Violence Strategy for the St. Louis Region – Mission, Vision, and Values

After deliberating over the course of two days, Practicum participants developed the following mission, vision, and values statements.

Mission: To save lives across the St. Louis region by reducing homicides and shootings by 20 percent over three years.

In its recently released Violent Crime Reduction Roadmap, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) observes the following: “Successful anti-violence efforts should begin with clear goals, with leaders setting ambitious but attainable targets, measured in concrete terms of reduced homicides and non-fatal shootings.”¹⁶ Practicum participants believed a 20 percent reduction in homicides and shootings over three years is feasible and can bring real relief to the region.

Vision: To engage those at the highest risk for violence, working to keep them alive, safe, and free while holding those who shoot and kill fully accountable.

Also in its Roadmap, DOJ notes that, “Research indicates that effective strategies provide services and supports to those at the highest risk for violence, coupled with swift and certain sanctions if violent conduct continues.”¹⁷ Participants discussed the importance of approaching the individuals and groups most likely to become involved in serious violence with a combination of empathy and accountability to maximize positive behavior change.

Values: The region’s new anti-violence strategy will be regionally focused, informed by evidence and data, and humanity centered.

Practicum participants identified several core values that will guide the region’s new anti-violence strategy. Being *regionally focused* means working collectively as a region to drive down violence where it is most concentrated. Being *evidence- and data- informed* means that decision-making should be informed by sound evidence and data. Being *humanity centered* means consistently reaffirming the humanity of those most impacted by violence.

A New Anti-Violence Strategy for the St. Louis Region – Key Programs

After reviewing the recent homicide analysis and hearing from more than a dozen local and national experts, Practicum participants identified the following program elements as integral to the region’s new anti-violence strategy. These elements should be implemented simultaneously and as soon as reasonably possible. Collectively, these elements are focused, balanced, and fair, as well as consistent with national best practices.¹⁸

¹⁶ Violent Crime Reduction Roadmap – Action 1. 2023. U.S. Department of Justice.

¹⁷ Violent Crime Reduction Roadmap – Action 1. 2023. U.S. Department of Justice.

¹⁸ Saving Lives: Ten Essential Actions Cities Can Take to Reduce Violence Now. 2022. Violent Crime Working Group, Council on Criminal Justice.

Program Element One: Launch a Regional Focused Deterrence Effort

Focused deterrence is a problem-oriented crime reduction strategy that mobilizes community residents, service providers, and law enforcement officials in response to chronic crime conditions.¹⁹ The approach generally includes detailed crime analyses, partnership between communities and law enforcement, customized support and targeted sanctions, and clear communication with victims and perpetrators. The message to potential offenders is simple: “We know you are involved in the violence. It must end now. If you let us, we will help you. If you make us, we will stop you.”

In most cases, the program is effective. Focused deterrence is supported by a relatively strong base of evidence that includes large impacts on violence. In Oakland, it cut gun homicides by 31 percent and group-involved shootings by 43 percent, and a systematic review of the approach reported favorable results in 22 of 24 studies from across the country.

Focused deterrence is criticized by some as a police-led strategy that only involves arrest, prosecution, incarceration. This is not true, but some early versions of the approach emphasized sanctions over supports. More recent versions pair high quality services with targeted sanctions if violence continues. This regional effort should do the same, balancing supports for positive behavioral change with strategic enforcement against those who engage in serious violence.

Program Element Two: Provide CBT-Informed Services to High-Risk Individuals

To maximize the effectiveness of the focused deterrence program, a robust set of supports fully informed by cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) and other behavior modification strategies should be developed.

CBT teaches people to manage emotions, address conflicts constructively, and think carefully before acting.²⁰ CBT can help even the highest-risk individuals change their thinking and behavior to avoid crime and violence.

CBT is supported by a strong base of evidence. In Chicago, randomized controlled trials have demonstrated that one CBT program reduced arrests for violent crimes among youth by half, while another program for adults reduced shooting and homicide arrests among high-risk individuals by 80 percent. A systematic review of 58 CBT studies found that such programs reduced criminal recidivism by 25 percent, with one of five programs cutting recidivism by more than half.

A key challenge identified by Practicum participants will be connecting high-risk individuals to the services they need to help them positively change their behavior. Many services are currently available in the region, but few reach those most likely to become involved in violence.

¹⁹ Law Enforcement Based Responses to Violence. 2021. Violent Crime Working Group, Council on Criminal Justice.

²⁰ Community Based Responses to Violence. 2021. Violent Crime Working Group, Council on Criminal Justice.

Program Element Three: Use Street Outreach to Connect Individuals to Services

Street outreach workers should be employed to ensure that these vital CBT-informed supports reach those who need them most.

Outreach by “credible messengers” to those at the highest risk for violence is an important component of many models for reducing serious violence.²¹ Also described as violence intervention or interruption, street outreach programs recruit frontline workers to mediate disputes and help those most at risk manage conflicts without resorting to violence. Outreach workers also connect individuals to social supports and services. Finally, some programs use community events and media campaigns to promote nonviolent norms.

The evidence concerning these programs is promising but mixed. Careful attention to strong implementation is critical, but when done properly, street outreach is a powerful anti-violence tool.

As noted by the recent homicide analysis, murders in the region concentrate not just among small numbers of individuals and groups, but also in a limited numbers of micro-locations known as “hot spots.” As implementation progresses, place-based programmatic elements to address violence in these micro-spaces, many of which are already underway, should be aligned with the people-based elements described above.

A New Anti-Violence Strategy for the St. Louis Region – Building Implementation Capacity

Anti-violence experts agree: translating an anti-violence vision into action requires clear and consistent leadership, management, and oversight.²² Collective action requires a common agenda, shared metrics, mutually reinforcing activities, regular communication, and “backbone” infrastructure.²³

As noted by Greater St. Louis Inc. and the Regional Business Council, “Regional problems require regional solutions. Homicides are a regional problem.”²⁴ In order to deliver the program elements above and achieve a 20 percent reduction in homicides and non-fatal shootings over three years, regional implementation capacity must be built.

To that end, Practicum participants agreed on several concrete capacity-building measures to push the region’s new anti-violence strategy forward. Participants and the leaders they represent have

²¹ Ibid.

²² Meeting Bulletin #7: Integrating Local Violence Reduction Efforts; State and Federal Support. 2021. Violent Crime Working Group, Council on Criminal Justice.

²³ Mark Kramer and John Kania. Collective impact. 2011. Stanford Social Innovation Review.

²⁴ The Need for a Regional Strategy, Greater St. Louis, Inc.

already made key commitments to make these successful. These commitments are the kinds of “quick wins” needed to build and maintain momentum as the region’s strategy is implemented.

Capacity-Building Measure One: Establish a Regional Anti-Violence Collaborative

A new regional collaborative should be established to guide the implementation of the previously described program elements. This new effort should bring together key stakeholders from across the region, both inside and outside government, and pay special attention to the inclusion of impacted community members. It should perform the “backbone” activities necessary to drive collective action, including convening regular meetings of stakeholders, ensuring consistent communication between stakeholders, engaging experts to provide training and technical assistance, tracking, analyzing, and sharing key data, and other key functions.

Quick win: The EWGCOG has agreed to seek approval from its Board of Directors to lead the development of this collaborative. The VRC has committed to support the development process as well.

Quick win: Greater St. Louis Inc., the Municipal League of Metropolitan St. Louis, and the Regional Business Council have agreed to provide early financial support for the collaborative.

Capacity-Building Measure Two: Establish a Regional Anti-Violence Advisory Board

The new collaborative should be governed by a Regional Anti-Violence Advisory Board, chaired by the Mayor of the City of St. Louis and the St. Louis County Executive. The board should engage a director or co-directors to manage the day-to-day activities of the collaborative.

Members of the board should include senior law enforcement officials such as chiefs of police, chief prosecutors, and others. Members should also consist of non-enforcement leaders including government, nonprofit, business, and public health executives. Importantly, representatives from impacted communities and leaders of community- and faith-based organizations should also be included. Board membership should be spread roughly evenly across these three groups.

Board meetings should be held quarterly, with the first meeting in April 2024. At that meeting, an official regional strategic plan should be approved. Board members should also hear from the regional implementation team (described below). These meetings should be open to the public and press.

Quick win: Mayor Tishaura Jones and County Executive Sam Page have agreed to serve as chairs of the new board.

Capacity-Building Measure Three: Launch a Regional Implementation Team

In addition to the meetings of the advisory board, regular meetings among key managers is necessary. A regional implementation team should be created to guide the day-to-day implementation of the new regional strategy. This team to report to the advisory board and be chaired by the collaborative director(s). The team should include representatives from the stakeholder groups identified above as well as outside training and technical assistance providers. Membership should generally be limited,

however, including only those responsible for implementing one or more of the program elements (focused deterrence, CBT, street outreach) above.

Team meetings should be held weekly, with the first meeting in January 2024, to drive rapid implementation. These meetings should be closed to the public and press.

Quick win: The EWGCOG and VRC have committed to organizing the regional implementation team and managing it until the collaborative's director(s) are in place.

Quick win: Mayor Tishaura Jones and County Executive Sam Page have agreed to designate representatives to serve as members of the team.

Capacity-Building Measure Four: Expand Regional Homicide Analysis Capacity

Practicum participants agreed that the homicide analysis produced by the VRC, EWGCOG, NNSC was instrumental in keeping stakeholders focused on the key drivers of homicides and shootings in the region. The analysis should be regularly refreshed and eventually expanded to include shootings as well as homicides, among other enhancements. The newly established collaborative should be charged with maintaining this analysis, and an updated analysis should be provided at the advisory board meeting in April 2024.

Quick win: EWGCOG has committed to support the homicide analysis until the collaborative is in position to take control.

Capacity-Building Measure Five: Build Regional Capacity for Coordination

The Office of Violence Prevention oversees and coordinates anti-violence activities for the City of St. Louis, but there are few if any non-enforcement counterparts in the surrounding counties. The city needs partners beyond those in law enforcement to engage and coordinate with on violence reduction activities.

Quick win: St. Louis County Executive Sam Page has agreed to create a new position in his office to coordinate and collaborate on violence reduction strategies, subject to available funds.

A New Anti-Violence Strategy for the St. Louis Region – First Steps

To maintain the momentum created by the Practicum, prompt action must be taken to turn participant recommendations into reality. These include but are not limited to the following:

1. Memorialize the mission, vision, values, and strategies discussed in the Practicum in a “plan to plan” (completed January 2024),
2. Share the “plan to plan” broadly, soliciting feedback from a wide array of additional stakeholders, revising the document as needed (January 2024),
3. Convene the first meeting of the Regional Implementation Team (January 2024),
4. Draft an official regional anti-violence strategic plan for review and approval (February 2024),

5. Engage director(s) to manage the Regional Anti-Violence Collaborative (March 2024), and
6. Review and approve the official strategic plan at the first meeting of the Regional Anti-Violence Advisory Board, beginning implementation immediately thereafter (April 2024).

Quick win: The EWGCOG will take responsibility for completing these first steps, with support from the VRC.

Conclusion

Reducing elevated rates of violence is never easy, but with right strategies in place, progress is possible. Working together, local leaders, stakeholders, and residents across the region can stop violence and save lives.

APPENDIX A

List of Practicum participants:

1. Sara Baker, St. Louis Mayor's Office
2. Nicolle Barton, Criminal Justice Coordinating Council
3. Mike Bradley, United States Attorney's Office
4. Tim Brinker, Presiding Commissioner, Franklin County
5. Pastor Rodrick Burton, New Northside Missionary Baptist Church
6. James Clark, Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis
7. Lt. Col. Juan Cox, SLCPD
8. Steve Ehlmann, St. Charles County
9. Fred Evans, Behavioral Health Network
10. Gabe Gore, St. Louis Circuit Attorney's Office
11. Andrea Harrington, St. Louis County Circuit Attorney's Office
12. Lt. Elbert Jennings, Illinois State Police
13. Adam Kazda, GSL, Inc.
14. Pat Kelly, Municipal League of Metropolitan St. Louis
15. Mark Kern, St. Clair County
16. Lt. Col Renee Kriesmann, SLMPD
17. Lt. Col Eric Larson, SLMPD
18. Dan Lewis, St. Clair County Circuit Attorney's Office
19. Annissa McCaskill, Forward through Ferguson
20. Jessica Meyers, St. Louis Area Violence Prevention Commission
21. Serena Muhammad, St. Louis Mental Health Board
22. Beth Orwick, St. Louis County
23. Wilford Pinkney, Office of Violence Prevention, St. Louis Mayor's Office
24. Dr. LJ Punch, Bullet Related Injury Clinic
25. Lee Slocum, UMSL
26. Captain David Tiefenbrunn, St. Charles County Police
27. Austin Walker, Regional Business Council
28. Lt. Col. Tim Whitney, Jefferson County Sheriff's Dept.
29. Jim Wild, EWGCOG
30. Erica Wiley, VPCC - Belleville Area Cluster

APPENDIX B

List of outside instructors:

1. Thomas Abt, Center for the Study and Practice of Violence Reduction
2. Alexis Acevedo, National Network for Safe Communities
3. Matt Clark, Denver Police Department
4. Philip Cook, Duke University
5. Melvyn Hayward, Chicago CRED
6. Talib Hudson, National Network for Safe Communities
7. David Muhammad, National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform
8. Laurie Owen, National Network for Safe Communities
9. Lee Slocum, University of Missouri-St. Louis
10. James Timpson, Roca, Inc.

APPENDIX C

List of Practicum sessions:

Monday, December 4th

- Welcome and Overview (Mayor Tishaura Jones, Dr. Sam Page, Jim Wild, Thomas Abt)
- The Regional Approach (Thomas Abt, elected officials)
- Violence in the St. Louis Region (Thomas Abt, Lee Slocum, Talib Hudson, Alexis Acevedo)
- First Principles for Violence Reduction (Thomas Abt)
- Focused Deterrence/Group Violence Interventions (Thomas Abt, Laurie Owen, Robert Tracy)
- Street Outreach Interventions (Thomas Abt, Melvyn Hayward, Wilford Pinkney)

Tuesday, December 5th

- Prevention, Intervention, and Recovery featuring Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Abt, James Timpson, Serena Muhammad)
- Place- and Problem-Based Policing (Thomas Abt, Renee Kriesmann)
- Environmental Crime Prevention (Thomas Abt, Farrakhan Shegog)
- Funding Anti-Violence Initiatives (Thomas Abt)
- Researcher/Practitioner Partnerships (Lee Slocum)

Wednesday, December 6th

- Communicating about Anti-Violence Initiatives (Thomas Abt)
- Fatal and Non-Fatal Shooting Investigations (Philip Cook, Renee Kriesmann)
- St. Louis Region Planning Session – Looking Backward (Thomas Abt, Jessica Meyers)
- St. Louis Region Planning Session – Moving Forward (Thomas Abt)
- St. Louis Region Planning Session continued

Thursday, December 7th

- Managing Multi-Strategy Anti-Violence Efforts (David Muhammad, Jim Wild)
- St. Louis Region Planning Session continued

Friday, December 8th

- Public Report-Out (Thomas Abt, Jim Wild)