

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/daniela-gilbert-knows-community-is-central-to-addressing-gun-violence>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Daniela Gilbert is the director of Veras Redefining Public Safety program.

The recent rise in gun violence has encouraged leaders and activists to amplify solutions like [community violence intervention \(CVI\) programs](#). These strategies work to reduce homicides and shootings by building relationships with people at the center of gun violence, and they can [save cities millions](#). More cities are investing in these programs, which take many forms: they may meet survivors of violence in the hospital, they may involve community-police collaboration, or they may employ violence interrupters who are from the communities where violence is occurring.

[Daniela Gilbert](#), director of Veras Redefining Public Safety program, has spent more than a decade implementing CVI strategies. She spoke to us about how she came to this work, its challenges, and what real investment in these programs looks like.

Tell us about your experience working on community violence interventions.

I've spent about 10 years working on violence reduction strategies in California, Arizona, and New York. Eight of those years were in my home state of California, where in 2011 I co-founded the [California Partnership for Safe Communities](#). I worked in 10 California cities over that period, but most intensively in Oakland and Stockton, on the implementation of group violence intervention (GVI), which is a type of violence reduction strategy that involves community members, law enforcement, and social service providers. GVI is highly collaborative. We communicate directly with people who are at the highest risk of involvement in gun violence. Our focus was on reducing shootings and homicides, improving outcomes for people at risk of violence and reducing recidivism, and building trust between communities and police. I also spent a year and a half at the New York City Police Department supporting its implementation of a GVI program.

When did these kinds of programs and strategies emerge?

The term community violence intervention didn't even exist when I started this work but the strategies were discussing emerged in the 1990s. There were a few replications in various places by the early 2000s. But of course, communities have been intervening in and preventing violent behavior since the beginning of time.

Recently there has definitely been more recognition of the importance of the role of community-based organizations and people with lived experience in non-punishment-oriented interventions around safety. President Biden's [American Rescue Plan](#) includes funding that can be used to invest in these programs.

How was the term community violence intervention coined?

A coalition of Black leaders and other leaders of color organized to develop a group called [Fund Peace](#), which, as I understand it, coined the term in 2021 in collaboration with the Biden-Harris administration to describe ways to reduce gun violence that occurs in the streetsways that don't center police and policing as the solution. They wanted to call attention to the kinds of solutions communities are seeking and the kinds of investments that communities need.

The fact that there's even a term to describe the constellation of strategies that one might consider community violence interventions reflects a long needed but relatively new mainstream recognition of its importance. The existence of this term helps center who must be part of the solution and the role of community in intervening in violence and promoting safety. I'm really inspired and grateful to the Black leaders and other leaders of color who pushed the Biden administration and worked together to develop a strong and growing coalition to demonstrate the importance of investing in solutions that don't involve more police.

In your work implementing CVI programs, what have been some of the challenges you encountered?

This is hard work. It depends on extraordinary levels of dedication and openness to working differently and humbly. And we need continued investment in capacity building to sustain and grow the workforce that's required to carry out these strategies.

This work requires organized resources to identify people at highest risk of violence. It requires respectful relentlessness. We support people who have been failed by our systems over and over, and they have typically experienced a lot of trauma. One of the pastors who I worked with in New York City would always end intervention meetings by saying, I love you, and there's nothing you can do about it. I think acknowledging challenges and approaching them with a solutions orientation is really important. And always centering people's humanity.

There's a broader challenge too. As a society, we don't invest in communities in a way that changes the fundamental underlying circumstances that generate the need for these acute interventions. These interventions are just that interventions. If we don't attend to developing antiracist policy and investments and designing things equitably, then we'll just replicate the same harm we always have. We

undervalue everything related to public safety and public welfare that doesn't have a punishment orientation. We need to remove barriers to employment. We need to provide access to high quality health care and stable housing. The broader landscape really is a challenge because it continues to put us in a position where we need to implement these strategies.

How did you come to this work?

I am the granddaughter of refugees and survivors of state violence. My grandparents fled Nazi Germany and pogroms, and eventually made it to what is now Israel and to Mexico. My grandfather survived concentration camps and many of my other relatives did not. Eventually, everyone made it to the United States. I grew up in Oakland, where I wasn't directly affected by the criminal legal system myself, but I was very aware of issues of gun violence.

In college, I really dove into these issues and learned about the ways in which our criminal legal system isn't designed to really promote safety and causes a lot of harm. I've always been interested in this fundamental of safety as a human right, and it just felt obvious that I wanted to dedicate my career to implementing solutions that promote safety. I'm grateful to have been able to work on public safety transformation with amazing people ever since.

People like Gilbert have been advocating for cities to implement health- and community-centered approaches like CVI programs for decades. They know that the answer to rising gun violence isn't more policing. Cities need to invest in [programs that offer real solutions](#).

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