

Justice Issue Brief

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Assessing Trends in Violence and Violence Prevention in Oakland, California: 2016–2019

Violent crime rates have fallen substantially in Oakland, California over the past 15 years, but violence prevention remains a top priority for the city. Oakland Unite, a network of community-based organizations focused on violence prevention, has been one of the city's key efforts to tackle this issue. Oakland Unite administers grants and provides coordination through a set of complementary interventions designed to improve outcomes for participants and ultimately reduce citywide violent crime. In this brief, we examine the services provided by Oakland Unite from 2016 to 2019 in the context of violent crime and other conditions across Oakland's neighborhoods, and summarize our past findings from this four-year evaluation period.

Oakland Unite dates back to the Violence Prevention and Public Safety Act of 2004, also known as Measure Y, which raised funds for violence prevention programs and policing and fire safety personnel through a parcel tax on Oakland property and a parking tax assessment. In 2014, Oakland residents voted to extend these levies for 10 years through Measure Z, which now raises about \$27 million annually. Roughly 40 percent of Measure Z's funds are directed to Oakland Unite. During fiscal year 2019–2020, Oakland Unite administered \$9,495,850 across 30 grants.

In July 2020, Oakland Unite officially became the Department of Violence Prevention. This newly created department is developing a comprehensive strategy to citywide violence prevention that is grounded in a public health approach. This includes prioritizing services for individuals residing in geographic areas of Oakland that are most impacted by multiple forms of violence and other challenging conditions. We begin this brief by examining crime trends in Oakland between 2016 and 2019, and then incorporate Oakland Unite participant information over the same period.

A network of violence prevention

Oakland Unite supports various interventions aimed at assisting individuals who have the highest risk of perpetrating or becoming victims of violence. Interventions implemented between 2016 and 2019 can be summarized as follows:

- **Life coaching** works closely with high-risk youth and young adults to offer mentoring and support, set and achieve goals, and deter involvement in violence and the justice system.
- **Employment and education support services** aim to improve the career prospects of hard-to-employ young adults through skill building and transitional employment. Services offered to at-risk youth aim to increase career readiness through academic support and employment experience.
- **Gender-based violence response** supports victims of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) and family violence. Agencies reach out to exploited youth, get them into safe environments, and provide wraparound supports to end their exploitation. Victims of family violence receive legal and socioemotional services as well as crisis response support, including emergency housing.
- **Shooting and homicide response** offers support to shooting and stabbing victims, relocation services for individuals at immediate risk of harm, and support for victims' families and others affected by homicide.

Violent crime in Oakland

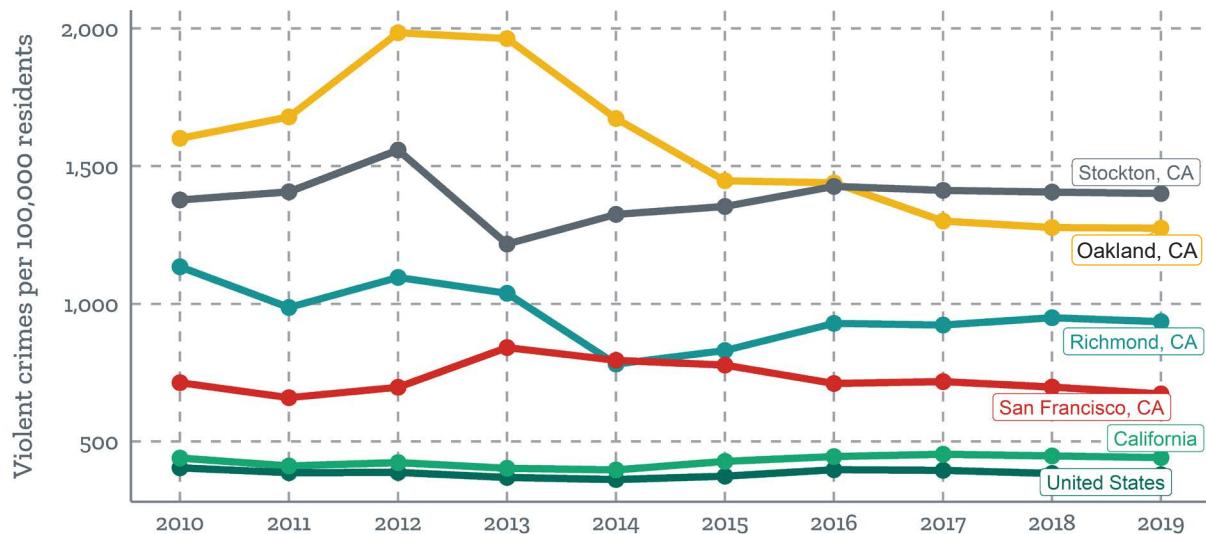
Violent crime in Oakland has dropped substantially since its recent peak in 2012, when an average of nearly 1 in every 50 residents were victims of violence.

Over the past decade, Oakland has had a higher rate of violent crime than its Bay Area neighbors (including San Francisco and Richmond) but only recently fell below the rate in Stockton, California, a high-crime city in the Central Valley. All of these cities experience more violent crime on a per capita basis than California and the United States (Figure 1).

Oakland's violent crime rate in 2019 was nearly three times higher than the California statewide rate, and 3.4 times the U.S. average. However, over the 2016–2019 evaluation period, Oakland's violent crime rate dropped by 9 percent. In contrast, other nearby cities have experienced only slight or no change in violent crime rates over the same period.

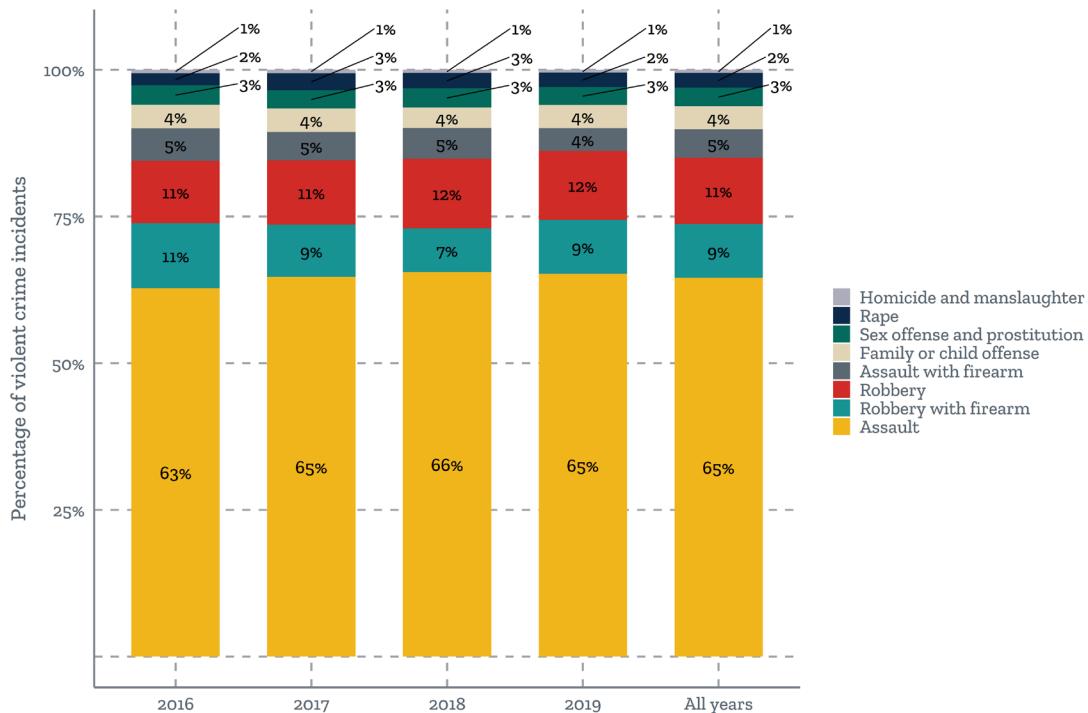
The types of violent crimes committed in Oakland were largely stable over the 2016–2019 period, with non-firearm assaults making up about two-thirds of the total each year. Non-firearm robberies were the next most common type of violent crime, averaging 11 percent of all violent incidents reported to police (Figure 2, on the next page). Violent crime involving a firearm (including robbery and assault) made up 10 to 15 percent of reported incidents each year. Rape, prostitution and sex offenses, and family and child offenses each accounted for roughly 2 to 4 percent of violent crime. Homicides made up fewer than 1 percent of violent crime incidents in Oakland and fell slightly during this period, from a high of 80 in 2016 to a low of 70 in 2019. Like overall violent crime, homicides during this period were down markedly from earlier in the decade, when there were 126 homicide incidents in 2012.

Figure 1. Violent crime over time for Oakland and comparison areas, 2010–2019



Source: Mathematica calculations using Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Reporting and annual population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Note: Violent crime totals include murder and non-negligent homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated and simple assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, larceny-theft, arson, prostitution, sex offenses, and offenses against family and children.

Figure 2. Violent crime in Oakland by incident type, 2016–2019

Source: Mathematica calculations using Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Reporting classifications and Oakland Police Department data from 2016–2019.

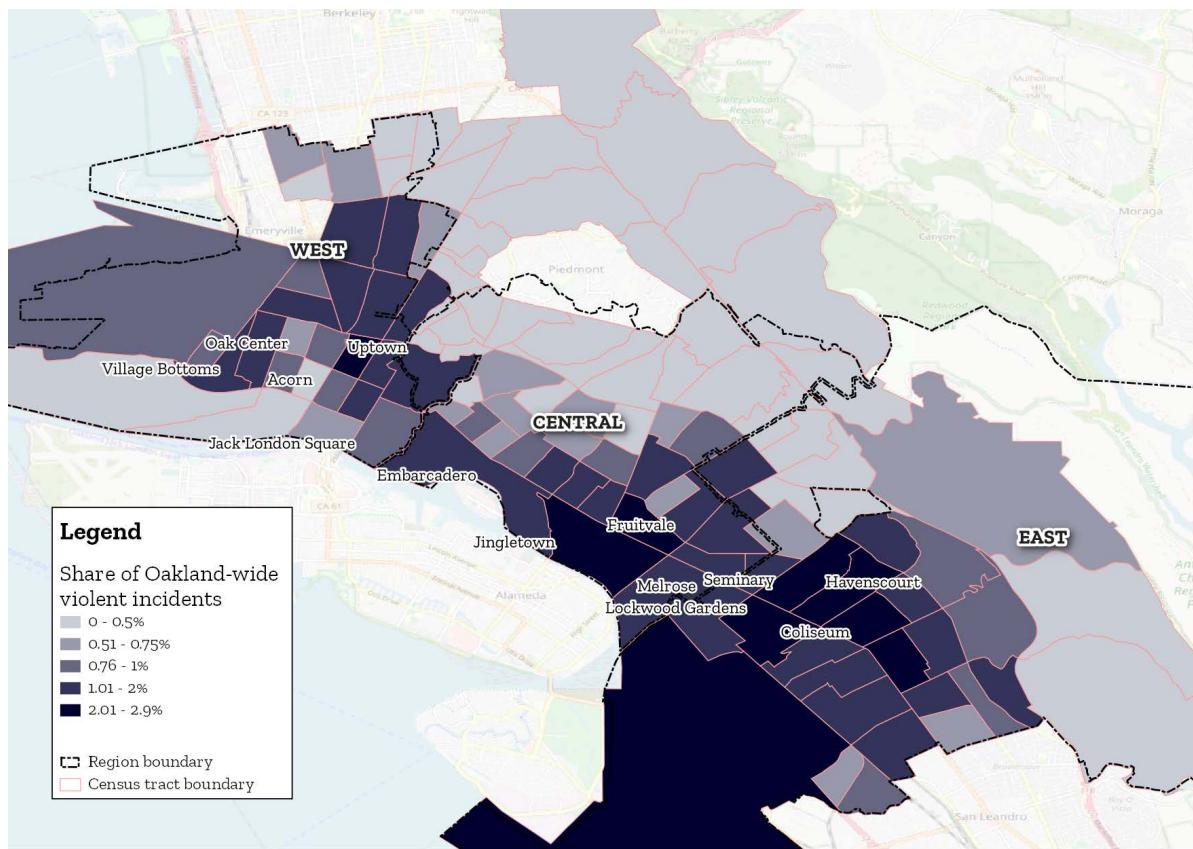
Note: Violent crime totals include murder and non-negligent homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated and simple assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, larceny-theft, arson, prostitution, sex offenses, and offenses against family and children.

Violent crime was not uniformly distributed throughout the city; a disproportionate number of violent incidents occurred in select neighborhoods, many of them in East Oakland. Although there were hot spots of violent crime in both West and Central Oakland, crime rates were higher overall in East Oakland and 10 of the 15 most violent census tracts were in Deep East Oakland (see box at right). The neighborhoods of Seminary, Lockwood Gardens (also known as 65th Village), and Havenscourt were among the hot spot areas within East Oakland, while Jingletown in Central Oakland, and Uptown in West Oakland were other areas where violent crime was concentrated. However, much of the violent crime in Uptown involved simple assaults, which are the least severe and are often charged as misdemeanors.

North Oakland, the Oakland Hills, and the census tracts east and north of Lake Merritt accounted for a relatively small share of violent crime and thus are predominantly shaded light gray in Figure 3 (on the next page).

What is a census tract?

A census tract is a small geographic region within a county defined for the purpose of collecting data for the U.S. census at the neighborhood-level. Census tracts generally average 4,000 inhabitants and are delineated with the goal of generating a homogeneous unit with respect to economic circumstances and population composition. There are 113 tracts either inside or overlapping Oakland's city boundaries.

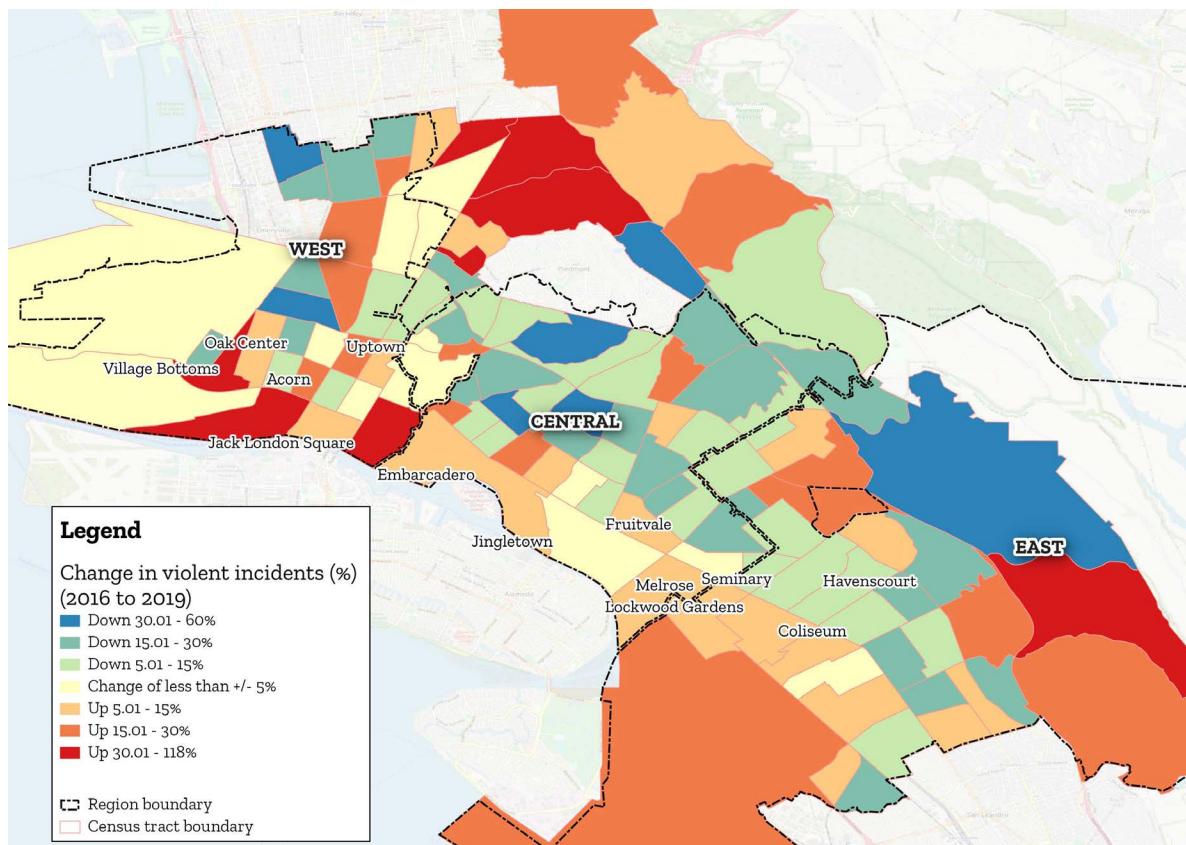
Figure 3. Distribution of violent crime incidents in Oakland by census tract, 2016–2019

Source: Mathematica calculations using Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Reporting classifications and Oakland Police Department data from 2016–2019.

Note: Violent crime totals include murder and non-negligent homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated and simple assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, larceny-theft, arson, prostitution, sex offenses, and offenses against family and children.

The areas of Oakland experiencing the most violent crime largely remained the same as violent crime fell overall between 2016 and 2019. Of the 15 census tracts with the most violent crime in 2016, 13 remained ranked among the 15 most violent in 2019. In the few cases where the rankings of the most violent tracts did change noticeably, violent incidents appear to have shifted to a bordering tract. For example, the census tract in the top 15 most violent that dropped the furthest in ranking (from 13th most violent to 33rd) borders the tract in the top 15 that increased the most in ranking (from 15th most violent to 10th). This suggests that there may not have been a clear shift in violent crime in the broader area.

Over half of the census tracts in Oakland experienced a decline in violent crime between 2016 and 2019. As Figure 4 (on the next page) illustrates, numerous census tracts in Deep East Oakland, including those covering Seminary and Havenscourt, saw a decrease in violent incidents of more than 5 percent between 2016 and 2019. Although the figure indicates that areas in North Oakland experienced increases in violent crime of more than 15 percent, these areas had relatively low levels of violent crime to begin with. Thus, even a small increase in the number of violent incidents would result in a large percentage increase, especially relative to other, more violent tracts. Overall, the decrease in violent crime was not concentrated in any one region of the city.

Figure 4. Change in number of violent crime incidents in Oakland by census tract, 2016–2019

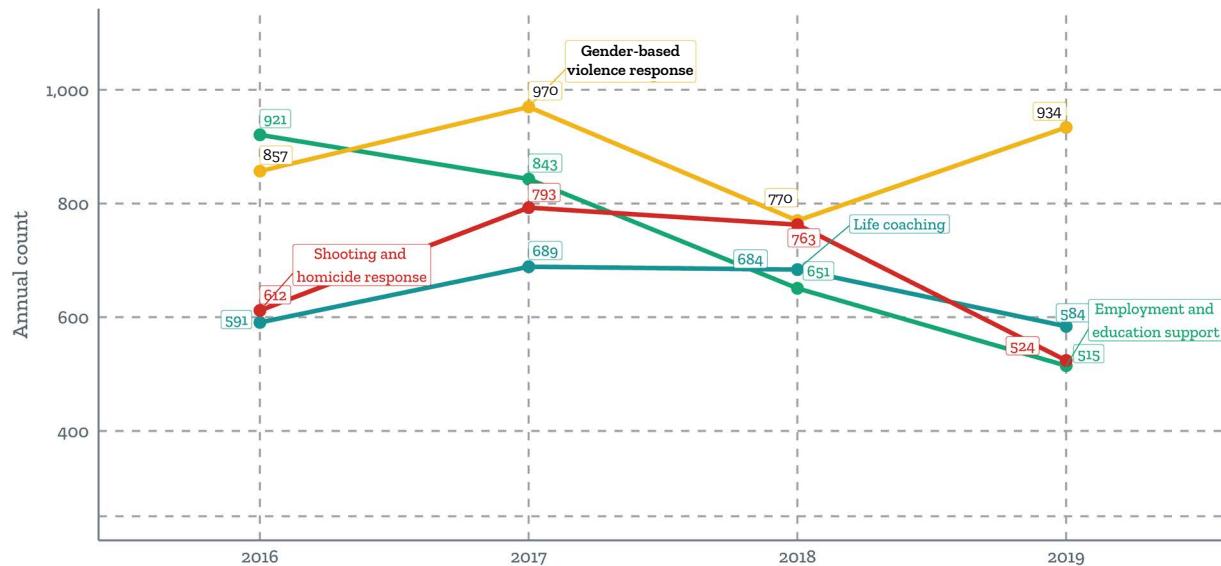
Source: Mathematica calculation using Oakland Police Department data from 2016 and 2019 for 113 census tracts.

Note: Percentages are calculated using the total number of violent incidents with a valid Oakland or Oakland-adjacent address on record that could be geocoded and assigned to a census tract.

Oakland Unite participants

Oakland Unite grantees served more than 8,500 individuals between 2016 and 2019, with each intervention providing services to more than 500 people a year. The gender-based violence programs served the most participants (Figure 5, on the next page), driven largely by the family violence intervention, which provided immediate crisis response services to victims and included a 24-hour hotline. Most interventions served a relatively stable number of participants each year, except for employment and education services, whose number of participants declined from 921 in 2016 to 515 in 2019, reflecting a relative decrease in the grant funds allocated to these services over this period.

Oakland Unite services targeted individuals at the highest risk of perpetrating or experiencing violence, many of whom had prior contact with the justice system. More than half (53 percent) of all Oakland Unite participants were arrested before receiving Oakland Unite services, and 34 percent were a victim of a reported violent crime.¹ However, specific risk factors vary from intervention to intervention based on the intervention's goals. For example, as an intervention aiming to divert youth and young adults from further involvement with the justice system, 79 percent of life coaching participants had been arrested before receiving services from Oakland Unite.

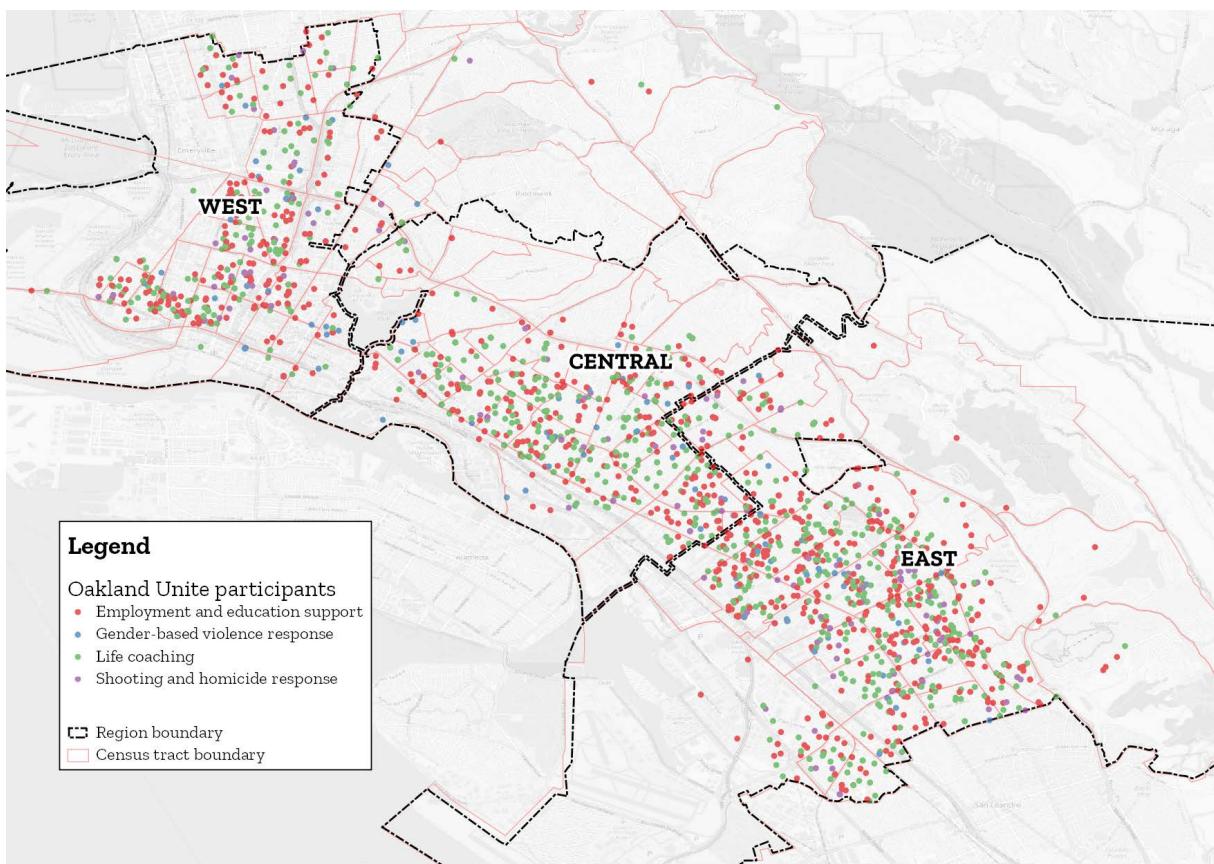
Figure 5. Number of annual Oakland Unite participants by intervention type, 2016–2019

Source: Mathematica calculation using Cityspan data from 2016–2019.

Note: This figure includes participants who logged a positive number of service hours and is limited to participants in the youth and adult EESS, youth and adult life coaching, shooting response, homicide support, CSE youth intervention, and family violence intervention. Participants are counted for each year in which they received service.

With the exception of the gender-based violence intervention, Oakland Unite programs primarily supported Black or Latino males. Over half (64 percent) of Oakland Unite participants were Black, and 18 percent were Latino. Looking across all interventions, 52 percent of participants were male. The gender-based violence intervention accounted for around half (51 percent) of female participants; across all other interventions, 69 percent of participants were male.

Oakland Unite served individuals from throughout Oakland, but the largest group were East Oakland residents. Thirty-four percent of participants resided in East Oakland, 24 percent in West Oakland, and 21 percent in Central Oakland. The remaining 21 percent were either residents of another region or did not provide address information. This pattern is broadly consistent for participants across the different types of interventions offered by Oakland Unite, as illustrated in subsequent maps.²

Figure 6. Residence of Oakland Unite participants by intervention type, 2016–2019

Source: Mathematica calculation using Cityspan data from 2016–2019.

Note: The sample comprises the 2,142 individuals (22% of all participants) who consented to share identifying information and had a valid Oakland or Oakland-adjacent address on record that could be geocoded and assigned to a census tract. Individuals receiving multiple intervention types are counted for each.

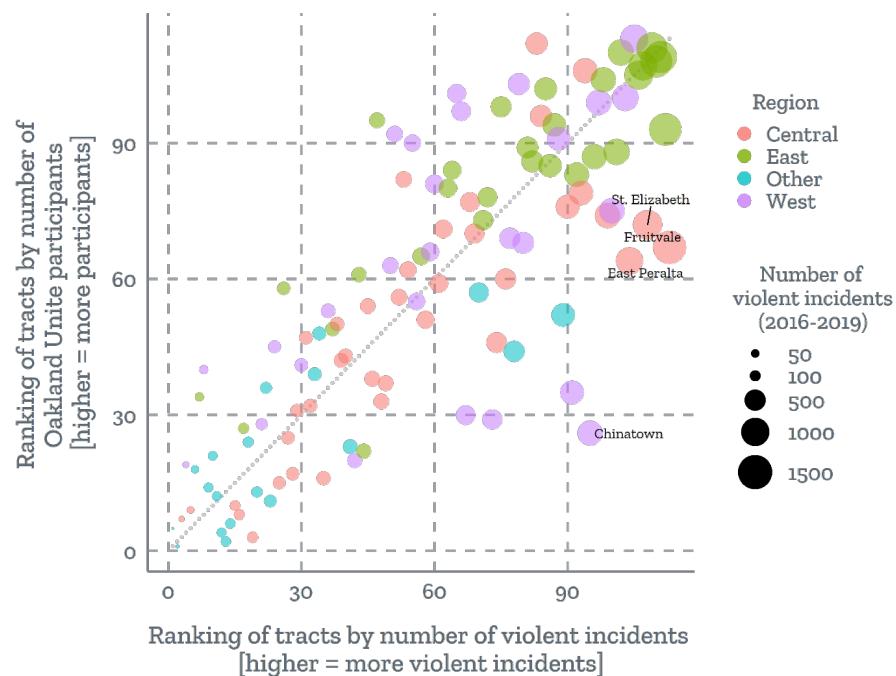
Geographic relationship of violent crime and Oakland Unite participants

Oakland Unite participants tended to reside in the most violent areas of the city. Violent crime directly and indirectly affects the lives of those surrounded by it. Many of the high-risk individuals Oakland Unite serves are affected by violent crime in the areas immediately near where they live. As Figure 7 (on the next page) illustrates, the greater the incidence of violent crime in a census tract, the greater the number of Oakland Unite participants who resided there. The cluster of dots found in the top-right corner of the plot indicates the census tracts where Oakland Unite services were concentrated—

namely East Oakland neighborhoods including Coliseum, Havenscourt, and Seminary (see Figure 3), which were among the most violent areas.

Although there is general alignment between neighborhood risk and Oakland Unite participation, there were several high-violence census tracts with disproportionately few Oakland Unite participants. East Peralta, Fruitvale, and Saint Elizabeth were several tracts that ranked among the most violent by number of violent crimes (indicated by their location on the horizontal axis of Figure 7), but did not rank in the top quarter of areas where participants resided (indicated by their location on the vertical axis). These areas may present further opportunities to align service delivery with communities' needs.

Figure 7. Comparison of tract-level violent crime and number of Oakland Unite participants, 2016–2019



Source: Mathematica calculation using Cityspan and Oakland Police Department data from 2016–2019 for 113 census tracts.

Note: Region designations are drawn using ZIP5/ZCTA5 boundaries and are displayed in Figure 5. The “Other” region encompasses all Oakland-based ZIP codes not captured in the other regions. Both victim and Cityspan participant counts are totals of participants and violent incidents that had a valid Oakland or Oakland-adjacent address on record that could be geocoded and assigned to a census tract. Participants receiving more than one type of intervention are counted multiple times.

In some cases, however, there may be reasons why Oakland Unite served fewer participants in tracts with relatively high concentrations of violent crime. For example, though Chinatown had relatively higher levels of violent crime compared to Oakland Unite participation, robberies, which are considered a less interpersonal type of violence, accounted for 35 percent of all violent incidents in the neighborhood. In contrast, in Lockwood Gardens (also known as 65th Village), where many Oakland Unite participants live, robberies accounted for 18 percent of violent incidents.

Given the reality of finite resources, Oakland Unite may have prioritized individuals from areas where interpersonal violence is most prevalent.

As noted above, the specific target population can vary by intervention. In the next section, we delve into different neighborhood risk factors to examine the relationship between risk and Oakland Unite participation for the employment and education support services, life coaching, commercial and sexually exploited youth, and shooting and homicide response intervention types.

Employment and education support services (EESS)

EESS aim to support youth and young adults at risk of becoming involved in the justice system to improve their access to better economic opportunities. In the map below (Figure 8) we present census tract-level unemployment rates across Oakland to discern which neighborhoods have had the greatest need for economic support and how that compares to the location of EESS participants.

Youth and adult EESS participants were largely concentrated where the unemployment rate exceeded the Oakland average of 6.6 percent (Figure 8). However, there were some unemployment hot spots where few EESS participants resided, such as Village Bottoms (also known as the Lower Bottoms) in West Oakland and Melrose in East Oakland. Areas such as the Embarcadero, where many people reside but are also commercial or industrial hubs, tend to have higher unemployment rates.

Over 150 EESS participants had a supportive residence listed as their address (supportive residences are marked with green diamonds in Figure 8).

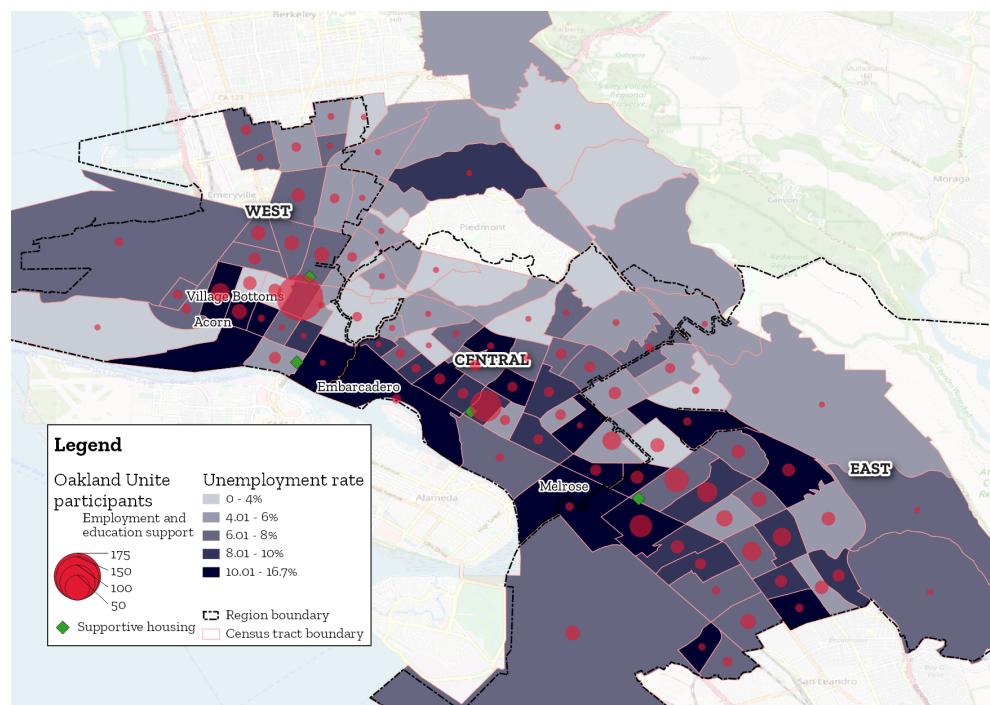
These residences included a shelter, a rehab facility, and a halfway home, indicating that EESS served individuals at high-risk junctions in their lives when they may have been facing housing instability and other challenges.

Past evaluation findings

In previous evaluations of adult and youth EESS outcomes, we found that relative to a comparison group of similar high-risk individuals:

- Adult EESS participants were 6 percentage points less likely to be arrested in the short term for both violent and nonviolent offenses ([Gonzalez et al. 2017](#)). EESS participants were on average at a lower risk of being victimized or exposed to/involved in violence relative to participants in Oakland Unite's life coaching program.”
- Youth EESS participants were 13 percentage points more likely to be enrolled in school, but there was limited effect on 12-month arrest rates ([Gonzalez et al. 2019a](#)).

Figure 8. Distribution of employment and education support services participants and unemployment rates by census tract, 2016–2019



Source: Mathematica calculation using Cityspan data from 2016–2019 and 2018 5-year American Community Survey estimates from the U.S. Census for 2018 for 113 census tracts.

Notes: Total counts of EESS participants are tabulated from the 1,221 individuals (62 percent of all EESS participants) who consented to share identifying information and had a valid Oakland or Oakland-adjacent address on record that could be geocoded and assigned to a census tract.

Life coaching

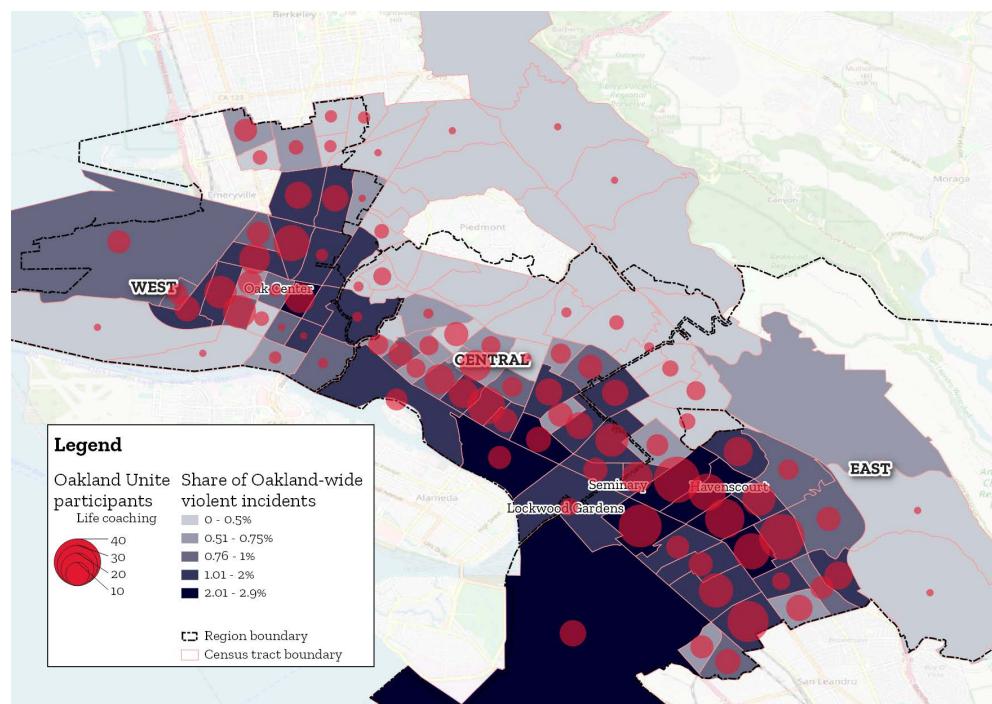
The life coaching intervention provides long-term case management support to justice-involved youth and young adults to reduce recidivism and prevent involvement with violence. Life coaching participants were concentrated in the highest-risk areas as measured by the prevalence of violent incidents. Lockwood Gardens (also known as 65th Village), Havenscourt, and Seminary in East Oakland were some of the areas with the highest number of both participants and violent crime. A small number of West Oakland neighborhoods such as Oak Center, containing Lowell Park, experienced high levels of violent crime but were home to relatively few life coaching participants.

Past evaluation findings

In previous evaluations of adult and youth life coaching outcomes, we found that relative to a comparison group of similar high-risk individuals:

- Adult life coaching participants were 1 percentage point less likely to be arrested for a violent offense in the short term, but there was limited impact on arrests for any offense ([Gonzalez et al. 2017](#)).
- Youth life coaching participants were 3 percentage points less likely to be arrested for a violent offense in the short term, but there was limited effect on 12-month arrest rates ([Gonzalez et al. 2019a](#)).

Figure 9. Distribution of life coaching participants and violent crime by census tract, 2016–2019



Source: Mathematica calculations using Cityspan and Oakland Police Department data from 2016–2019 for 113 census tracts.

Notes: Tract-level counts of life coaching participants are tabulated from the 992 individuals (64 percent of all life coaching participants) who consented to share identifying information and had a valid Oakland or Oakland-adjacent address on record that could be geocoded and assigned to a census tract.

Commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) youth intervention

The CSE youth intervention provides crisis response and intermediate-term services to youth and transitional age youth (ages 18 to 25) impacted by sexual exploitation. In contrast to other intervention types, there is little relationship between hot spots of commercial sexual exploitation and where intervention participants lived. This pattern is expected, as incidents of commercial sexual exploitation are largely concentrated along a strip of International Boulevard in the Fruitvale neighborhood that is well known as the city's hot spot for prostitution.

Many CSE youth participants reported East Oakland addresses, although 18 participants listed either MISSSEY or Covenant House, two of the three CSE youth intervention agencies, as their address.

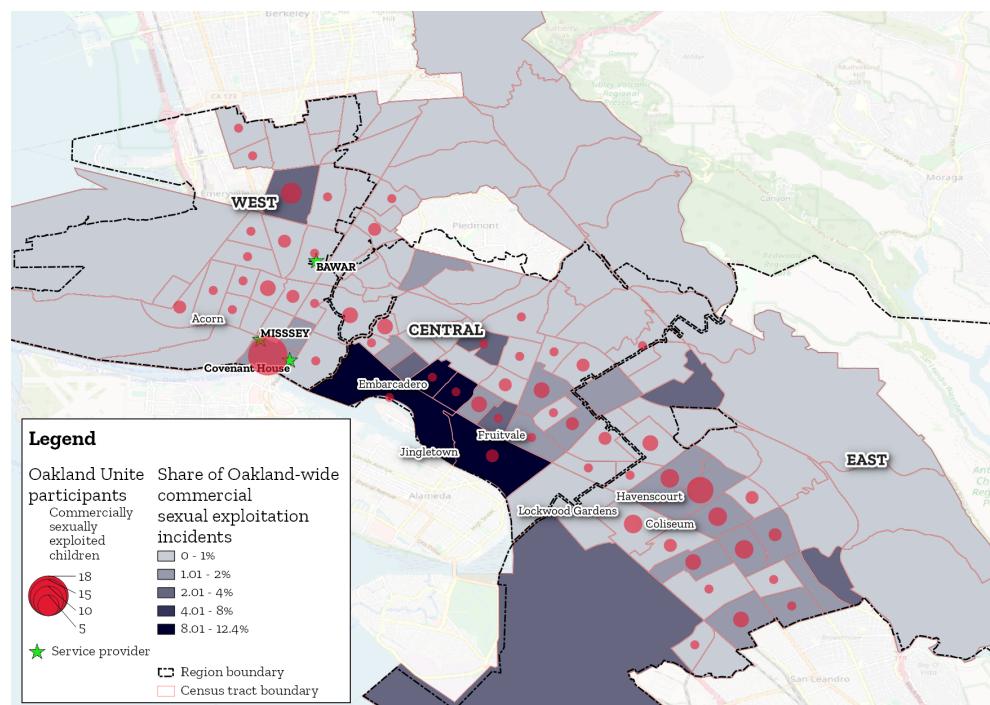
Housing insecurity is one of the most prevalent risk factors for CSE youth, and many participants may reside in Covenant House's DreamCatcher shelter or may have listed an agency's address as their own because they do not have a stable residence.³

Past evaluation findings

In a previous evaluation of the implementation of the CSE youth intervention, we found that:

- Agencies serve the intended population of girls and young women of color with a history of victimization, contact with law enforcement, and school disengagement ([Gonzalez et al. 2019b](#)).
- Multiple agencies and branches of government are tackling the issue of CSE in Alameda County, but a cohesive strategy is lacking ([Gonzalez et al. 2019b](#)).

Figure 10. Distribution of commercially sexually exploited children participants and commercial sexual exploitation-related violent crime by census tract, 2016–2019



Source: Mathematica calculation using Cityspan data from 2016–2019 and Oakland Police Department data from 2017–2019 for 113 census tracts.

Note: Tract-level counts of CSE youth intervention participants are tabulated from the 125 (16 percent of all CSE participants) individuals who consented to share identifying information and had a valid Oakland or Oakland-adjacent address on record that could be geocoded and assigned to a census tract. CSE-related violent crimes include UCR code 37 and statute code PC236.1 (C). CSE incidents are not limited to a specific age range and include 2017–2019 to account for State Bill 1322, before which incidents may not appear in victim records.

Shooting and homicide response

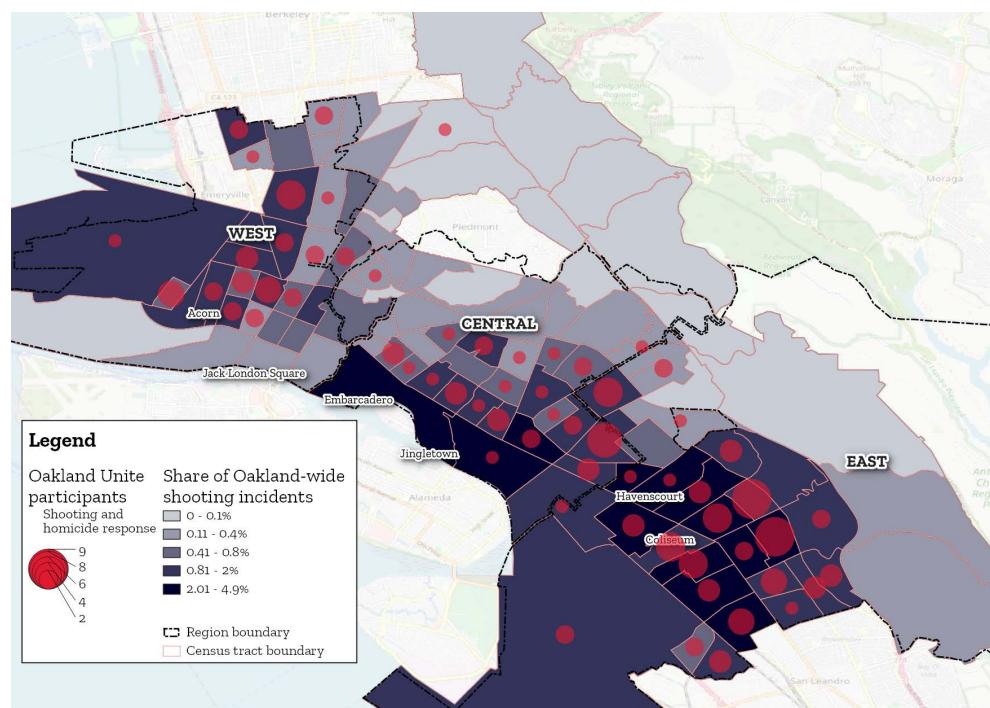
The shooting and homicide response intervention provides crisis response supports to shooting victims and families of homicide victims to prevent retaliation and further victimization and help victims and their families work through trauma. Overall, there is a strong correlation between where participants lived and where shootings occurred, which were both concentrated in Deep East Oakland. Several census tracts were the site of many firearm-related violent incidents but served comparatively few participants. These areas include Seminary and Havenscourt in East Oakland and Jingletown and Embarcadero in Central Oakland.

Past evaluation findings

In a previous evaluation of the implementation of the shooting and homicide response intervention, we found that:

- Participants largely avoided reinjury and retaliation after receiving services ([D'Agostino et al. 2020](#)).
- Participants' needs were addressed through both immediate and long-term services that were individualized to their needs ([D'Agostino et al. 2020](#)).

Figure 11. Distribution of shooting and homicide response participants by census tract, 2016–2019



Source: Mathematica calculation using Cityspan and Oakland Police Department data from 2016–2019 for 113 census tracts.

Note: Total counts of shooting and homicide response sub-strategy participants are tabulated from the 162 individuals (8 percent of all shooting and homicide response participants) who consented to share identifying information and had a valid Oakland or Oakland-adjacent address on record that could be geocoded and assigned to a census tract.

Looking ahead

Between 2016 and 2019, Oakland Unite provided services to thousands of individuals throughout the city in an effort to reduce violence. During this same period, violent crime fell nearly 10 percent citywide. Past evaluation findings suggest that Oakland Unite provided needed supports to individuals at the center of violence and potentially improved outcomes for participants. As the repercussions of violence are extremely costly to society—over \$1 million in direct costs for a single shooting injury and potentially higher when all costs from medical bills, lost income, and quality of life are considered—investments in violence reduction are likely to be cost-effective and pay dividends over the long run through avoided social and financial costs.^{4,5} Oakland Unite services can continue to aid in the decline in violent crime seen between 2016 and 2019 by supporting the individuals at the highest risk of involvement in and exposure to violence.

Although the relationship between residence and incidence of violent crime is not always straightforward, Oakland Unite provided services to participants who live in the highest-risk areas of Oakland and are thus most likely to be affected by violence. However, there are certain tracts throughout the city that have a disproportionate share of violent crime compared to their share of service participants. As Oakland Unite, now known as the Department of Violence Prevention, transitions to a public health strategy that aims to hone in on and allocate resources to neighborhoods and people with the highest need, this brief offers opportunities to look closely at specific census tracts that may benefit from more focused service provision.

Endnotes

¹ Individuals who received multiple intervention types are counted for each, based on their baseline characteristics at the start date of each intervention.

² Although Figure 6 is limited to participants who provided a valid Oakland address, the region-level breakdowns are largely consistent with the full sample of participants based on ZIP code information which is available for all Oakland Unite participants.

³ Participants may also have listed an agency address because of confidentiality and/or safety concerns. Cityspan data does not provide additional details about participants' housing status and permanence of a participants' reported address.

⁴ Frandsdottir, Edda and Jeffrey A. Butts. "Who Pays for Gun Violence? You Do." New York, NY: Research and Evaluation Center, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York. 2020.

⁵ Muhammad, David. "Oakland's Successful Gun Violence Reduction Strategy." Oakland, CA: National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, January 2018.