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Re-Centering the Community in Violence Intervention: Reclaiming Legacies of Street Outreach in the Provision of Public Safety

David M. Hureau[1] and Andrew V. Papachristos[2]

[1]School of Criminal Justice, Rockefeller College, University at Albany, SUNY, Albany, New York, USA; email: dhureau@albany.edu

[2]Institute for Policy Research, Department of Sociology, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA; email: avp@northwestern.edu

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Abstract

Cities across the country have increasingly turned toward community violence interventions (CVI) to address community safety without relying on criminal legal strategies. This article inspects beneath the veneer of present-day CVI approaches to examine how their work is dedicated as much to neighborhood social organization as it is to responding to gun violence. Underneath contemporary definitions of outreach workers as mediators of violence, earlier sociologists and criminologists conceived of these workers as frontline builders of community charged with mending breaks in the social fabric. Acknowledging this past is important because it re-centers criminology's contributions to the practice of street outreach and provides insights that help to comprehend the challenging present moment in American public safety. We offer directions for a reinvigorated social science of street outreach that re-centers community processes, structures, and institutions and, in so doing, might better inform contemporary practice and policy.

INTRODUCTION

"Dee"[1] is one of Chicago's 230 community violence interventionists commonly referred to as street outreach workers, unarmed civilians who attempt to reduce gun violence by intervening in gang disputes, mediating violent conflicts, and connecting individuals to life-saving services. A central activity of this sort of violence prevention work is what outreach workers like Dee call canvassing: walking or driving around a neighborhood, visiting corners and streets known to be violence hot spots, and trying to connect with people they know to be involved in ongoing violent disputes. One late summer day in 2022, Dee cruised through a South Side Chicago neighborhood looking for members of X-Town. The previous Memorial Day, Dee brokered a nonaggression agreement between X-Town and their long-time rivals the 63rd Street Mob. The agreement was straightforward: The two groups promised not to engage in any unprovoked aggression toward each other. But, a few days earlier, a member of X-Town was shot while hanging out in a nearby park, and some parts of the neighborhood claimed that 63rd Street had something to do with it. Dee's street network had a different story. Several local residents and those in X-Town's wider network of associates had reason to believe the shooter was not affiliated with 63rd Street but, rather, was an out-of-town relative of a romantic partner of the injured party. In other words, the shooting stemmed from a romantic relationship and had nothing to do with the issues that sustained the beef between X-Town and 63rd Street. Not long after the shooting, a 63rd Street leader reached out to Dee attesting that they had no reason to break the peace. About 30 minutes into his canvassing, Dee spotted some influential members of X-Town and flagged them down. Dee chatted and debated and, after an hour or so, successfully convinced the members of X-Town to honor the nonaggression agreement.[2] Crisis averted; peace sustained.

This sort of violence intervention work—sometimes referred to as violence interruption—has gained political popularity as cities across America seek to develop ways to reduce gun violence without relying on intensive policing and incarceration (Butts et al. 2015, Sanders & Monk 2023). In 2022, the city of Chicago more than tripled its investments in programs using this sort of outreach work, devoting nearly $50 million dollars in municipal support; Philadelphia's violence prevention budget increased nearly $155 million in that same year (see Papachristos et al. 2023). In 2022, President Biden's Build Back Better initiative funneled $5 billion dollars toward community violence intervention (CVI) programs, prominently featuring violence interruption efforts (White House 2021). The broad support and rapid growth of outreach programs stem from many forces, such as the public health turn in gun violence prevention (Hemenway 2010); the proliferation of the CureViolence program that reframed the understanding of gun violence as a contagious disease during the early 2000s (Slutkin 2011); through popular culture via an Emmy Award–winning documentary, *The Interrupters*, profiling those that interrupt violence (James 2011); the establishment of city-level violence prevention departments, such as the GRYD (Gang Reduction & Youth Development) office in Los Angeles (Duncan 2012); and, most recently, calls for the expansion of community-based strategies to address gun violence to reduce reliance on the criminal legal system (Branas et al. 2020, Buggs 2022).

Yet the immediate violence interruption and conflict mediation that Dee engaged in represents only a fraction of the work outreach workers do. His efforts to broker peace between X-Town and 63rd Street took up less than 25% of his 9-hour shift that day. The rest of the day was spent helping a participant fill out paperwork to expunge a criminal record, bagging and delivering food staples to a neighborhood family, co-facilitating a peer therapy group for a mentoring program,

[1] All names of individuals, groups, and places other than cities are pseudonyms.
[2] Outreach workers often refer to this sort of process as rumor control.

and attending a planning meeting for a community BBQ at a nearby park. Earlier that week Dee participated in a community-wide planning meeting to discuss back-to-school safety for returning students and attended a series of meetings about how his organization was going to help mobilize residents to participate in upcoming elections for local police oversight boards. Outreach workers do not just interrupt violence, they also provide access to life-changing services, engage in proactive peace-building, and weave together disparate types of community residents and institutions.

A model of CVI work that focuses principally on interrupting violence, while important, obscures the deeper, nuanced, and complex ways outreach workers create public safety and community well-being. A cursory glance at Dee's activities on the day he maintained peace between X-Town and 63rd Street shows that outreach's efforts to promote public safety go well beyond first responder–like activities of mediating disputes and responding to shootings. Even when outreach workers are performing vital and life-saving violence intervention work, they are frequently doing significantly more than convincing people to put down a gun. They are building community in the deepest sense of the word, making connections between and among neighbors and institutions. They are trying to teach people—especially those who have been locked up or locked out of other institutions—the process of trusting institutions and neighbors. They serve as bridges to crucial resources that are scarce and hard-fought for in many neighborhoods. And they are often active community organizers for issues like education, housing, employment, and political participation that would otherwise appear outside of the traditional CVI wheelhouse. In sociological terms, they are active builders of social capital, bridgers of social and institutional networks, and supporters of neighborhood mechanisms of informal social control and collective efficacy.

Although these activities may seem like innovations or evolutions in outreach practice, they are not—they appear so only through the lens of the present. Publicly, contemporary outreach models often emphasize narrow specialization in gun violence intervention, but such approaches cut against the grain of nearly 100 years of street outreach theory and practice grounded in broader notions of community empowerment and public safety. This article inspects beneath the veneer of present-day CVI outreach approaches to more closely examine how CVI work is dedicated as much—if not more—to neighborhood social organization as it is to immediately responding to gun violence. Layered underneath the formal plans that define outreach workers as violence interventionist specialists are the traces of earlier sketches of the theory and practice of street outreach work authored by urban sociologists and criminologists, who saw these workers as frontline builders of community charged with mending breaks in the social fabric. Excavating these insights from the past—especially in this current historical moment when cities are trying to reimagine public safety and are wrestling with intense racial disparities in the criminal legal system—is important not only because it corrects the record to re-center criminological contributions to the practice of street outreach but also, and more expansively, because appreciation for this longer history of street outreach theory and practice can help us to comprehend the challenging moment in American public safety in which we find ourselves—one defined by the need for a civilianized, community-based public safety system with infrastructure and capacity robust enough to meet the challenge of entrenched gun violence in the context of enduring social inequality.

This article begins by exploring the origins of street outreach work in the United States from its grounding in early sociological theory and social work practices at the turn of the century to its near abandonment in favor of punitive criminal justice approaches by the early 1970s. This first part of street outreach's history envisioned the practice as an essential way to reduce delinquency in disadvantaged areas while simultaneously bolstering community capacity for social control. The second section describes the pivotal turn in outreach theory and practice toward a specific type of public health model that privileged the interruption of gun violence in individualist epidemiological terms, often to the neglect of preceding community-centered theories and

approaches. This period also re-oriented street outreach's research agenda almost entirely toward program evaluation, with these evaluations generally producing mixed results. The third section describes the revival—and even elevation—of contemporary outreach-based approaches that are both embracing as well as pushing back against individualistic theories of change. We conclude by suggesting a future direction for the study of street outreach that re-centers community processes, structures, and institutions and, in so doing, might help to reinvigorate a scientific study of street outreach that will be capable of better informing contemporary outreach practice.

FROM THE SETTLEMENT HOUSE TO SPERGEL

The emergence of street outreach work can be traced to the late nineteenth century and was tied to the rise of novel societal institutions like Boys Clubs and settlement houses that developed around the Progressive Era in an effort to address the social ills that were perceived to result from rapid urbanization, industrialization, and concentrated immigration in American cities. By the early twentieth century, this meliorative work was becoming informed by social science theory and practice, particularly at the intersection of the research being done alongside the social activism of pioneers like Jane Addams (1909) and the early American sociology of the Chicago School associated with Robert Park & Ernest Burgess (1925). By the time Park's student Frederic Thrasher (1927) wrote *The Gang*, the author was able to describe more than a dozen private and public "boys' work" agencies within the city that shared responsibility with police for addressing the problems associated with gangs and juvenile delinquency. Aligned with the views of social reformers as well as the social scientists who trained him, Thrasher (1927) understood these problems—which included fighting, begging, shoplifting, jack-rolling, immorality, and idleness—as fundamentally rooted in community-level structures (Shaw & McKay 1942). Thus, by the early twentieth century, street outreach workers (known as boys', settlement, and detached workers) had established a professional paradigm that aligned with leading sociological theories of the day: Their street-based outreach and relationship building with gangs and delinquent groups harnessed the proto-organization of these collectives, seeking to redirect activities toward pro-social ends that would simultaneously reduce delinquency and facilitate community organization and integration.

By the mid-century period, what Klein & Maxson (2006) referred to as the "transformational approach"—the idea that gangs could be transformed and could serve as key building blocks for community transformation—was the preeminent urban policy stance toward gangs and juvenile delinquency. Perhaps the foremost example of this approach was Clifford Shaw's own Chicago Area Project (CAP), founded in 1934 and inspired by Shaw & McKay's foundational research into "delinquency areas"—urban ecologies that were disproportionately generative of delinquency because of structural disadvantages in community capacity for supervising youth at risk for delinquency. As described by Kobrin (1959, p. 19), "the major activity [of] the Area Project [was] the development of youth welfare organizations among residents of delinquency areas, and within the structure of those groupings, direct work with predelinquent and delinquent individuals and groups." CAP's multi-neighborhood scale was distinctive, as was its ambition to induce large reforms capable of restructuring community conditions theorized to cause delinquency. The project afforded autonomy to local neighborhoods to define and implement community building and wide-ranging delinquency control efforts, including a commitment to leveraging local expertise and the hiring of what it referred to as "indigenous" outreach workers. Similarly styled area project interventions followed in CAP's wake, including the Welfare Council of New York City's 1947–1950 Central Harlem Street Clubs Project (Crawford et al. 1950) and Walter Miller's (1962) 1954–1957 Total Community Gang Control Project in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood. Operating through the organizational infrastructure and networks of institutions like the YMCA and

Boys Club, detached worker programs proliferated in American cities through the middle of the twentieth century (Klein 1995).

The idea of using outreach workers to transform gangs and communities was complicated but not abandoned as the problem populations associated with crime in American cities shifted from foreign-born white ethnic populations to rapidly expanding Black populations heading to cities as part of a Second Great Migration, who found themselves confined to overcrowded and racially segregated neighborhoods (Muhammad 2019). Rather than focus on easing the transition of immigrant youth within transitional areas of the city, the challenge of outreach work into the 1960s became one of addressing the alienation, lack of opportunity, and serious delinquency within the new and seemingly permanent Black ghetto (Finestone 1976). During this new decade, the transformational ethos of the Chicago School was blended with the logic of Cloward & Ohlin's (1960) opportunity theory, which viewed delinquency as the result of limited access to conventional means of success, such as education or employment; in impoverished urban neighborhoods, gangs offered social support and a cultural frame for marginalized young men to make sense of the alienation induced by a structural lack of opportunity. Opportunity theory influenced the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' subsequent War on Poverty by leveraging outreach workers to reach the disconnected inner city delinquent/gang member to provide employment opportunities, connect them to welfare service provision, facilitate community empowerment, and even quell rioting and social unrest (Dawley 1992, Hinton 2017).

Although the early settlement house projects, along with CAP, were theoretically informed and empirically studied, they were not formally evaluated in the same ways that the mid-century programs were.[3] The first outcropping of evaluation literature emerged in the 1960s through the early 1970s and investigated the impact of street outreach in working with street gangs as a means to transform communities affected by high rates of juvenile delinquency. These formative evaluations of street outreach efforts were concerned principally with these programs' impacts on individual- and gang-level measures of delinquency. The results of street outreach evaluations in Boston (Miller 1962), Chicago, (Gold & Mattick 1974) and Los Angeles (Klein 1971) eventually consolidated a scholarly understanding that streetwork programs typically did not reduce delinquency among the young people they served, and some studies even provided evidence that such programs could potentially increase gang delinquency because of a combination of weak program theory and unfocused outreach worker activities that could increase attachment to the gang. Prominent gang researcher Malcolm Klein did as much as anyone to influence scholarly and practical debate on the efficacy and potential of streetwork programs, bombastically calling for their severe modification or outright abandonment. Drawing upon the contemporary evaluation research as well as his own results in Los Angeles, he concluded one of his book's final chapters by writing: "Were I in a position to do so, I would immediately eliminate *all* gang programs except those few—if they exist—which are truly experimental in the scientific sense of the word. The rest represent a waste of manpower and an affront to the evaluations which have taken place in recent years" (Klein 1971, p. 236, emphasis in original).

These mixed and negative evaluations lent additional ammunition to policymakers and practitioners skeptical of social approaches to tackling gang crime and rising violence in American cities. As Hinton (2017) has shown, even at the height of America's War on Poverty, the federal government's investment in American cities—first in juvenile delinquency under Kennedy and then in urban problems related to social order under Johnson—helped create the necessary

[3]Rather than evaluate program efficacy, much of the research emanating from this earlier period sought to understand both the community conditions and the small group process and structures that generated observed patterns of delinquency (e.g., Miller 1962, Short & Strodtbeck 1965).

infrastructure for a punitive turn in justice policy that specifically focused on the potential criminality of young Black and Latino men. Street outreach approaches—many of which had been supported by federal anti-delinquency funds—were increasingly seen as not up to the task of addressing serious criminality and violence. Streetwork rapidly fell out of favor as social policy discussions questioned the wisdom of root-cause investment in communities and the state's capacity to reform offenders. Starting in the late 1960s and accelerating through the 1980s, policymakers called for increased deterrence and incapacitation (Garland 2001, Travis et al. 2014), which transferred the social management of the gang from the street outreach worker to the police via specialized gang units deemed a better mainstream policy response to the challenges street gangs posed to community safety (Balto 2019, Hinton 2017, Tita & Papachristos 2010). In a few short years, the policy regime had dramatically shifted from helping gangs to fighting gangs, cementing the criminal justice approach—with its associated surveillance, punishment, and increasing use of incarceration—as the reasonable way to deal with street gangs.[4] As such, the period from 1970 through 2000 has been credibly described as representing a three-decade hiatus for the street outreach worker approach to addressing gangs and gang violence (Tita & Papachristos 2010).

Malcolm Klein's (1971) wish to eradicate gang outreach programs might have come true were it not for the defiant perseverance of one of Klein's peers, Irving Spergel. A longtime social worker, gang outreach supporter, and University of Chicago professor, Spergel's Chicago-based Little Village Gang Violence Reduction Project (GVRP) of the 1990s represented perhaps the most obvious and important example of a street outreach intervention flourishing during the post-1970 outreach programming void (Spergel 2007). Spergel took advantage of the growth of criminal justice infrastructure—and grant funding—in American cities to pragmatically address gang violence, blending the sociological street outreach tradition that he inherited with elements of social work (direct service provision), juvenile justice (probation), and suppression.

Specifically, the GVRP integrated street outreach work within a larger comprehensive framework to bolster community institutional capacity to respond to gang problems through a mix of outreach, suppression, opportunities provision, and community mobilization services. In the spirit of the time, the GVRP did not challenge the primacy of law enforcement responsibility for gangs; on the contrary, the program espoused suppression as a crucial ingredient in gang control and included police and probation officers alongside street outreach workers in its working groups (Spergel 2007). In fact, the program was administered and initially funded by the Chicago Police Department, with subsequent financial support provided by the Department of Justice. Spergel's expansive evaluation of GVRP's impact revealed significant reductions in arrests for serious violence among the approximately 200 gang-involved individuals served by the program when compared to similar untreated populations. Further analyses also showed self-reported decreases in individual-level violent offending but increases in overall gang-level violence for the two gangs that were the focus of the intervention. Although GVRP's findings in Chicago were mixed, the strategy was heralded as a programmatic model by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, which provided funding and technical support for other municipalities seeking to replicate Spergel's (2007) comprehensive approach.

Despite the enthusiasm for the comprehensive model, the ensuing implementations in other cities experienced many of the same problems as Spergel did in Chicago: Police and streetworkers

[4]A key dimension of this criminal justice approach was its punitive nature. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, laws and policies were passed that restricted where, when, and with whom gangs and gang members could socialize (i.e., civil gang injunctions and gang loitering laws) while sentence enhancement efforts for gang-involved or gang-motivated crimes gained traction at the state and federal levels (Marston 2018, Ridgeway et al. 2019).

did not easily share the same stage, street outreach approaches were difficult to fund, and strategies intended to be comprehensive instead ended up offering mostly suppression with sporadic service provision (Klein & Maxson 2006, Spergel 2007).

Although not Spergel's brand of comprehensive model, several other influential outreach programs—conceived of as part of broader citywide anti-violence strategies—would emerge around this time in other parts of the country and have a profound impact on the field. In Boston, both city-funded streetworker and privately funded faith-based outreach programs developed in the 1990s; these programs later fed into a larger (police-led) citywide collaborative effort involving focused deterrence to generate large reductions in gun violence, resulting in what has been called the Boston Miracle (Braga et al. 2017, Kennedy 2011). Despite the importance of street outreach work to Boston's comprehensive strategy, these efforts proved difficult to sustain; conflicts among ministers reduced the efficacy of faith-based outreach efforts, whereas the city-funded streetworker program experienced cuts that halved its capacity over a few short years (Braga et al. 2008). Also inspired by the Spergel model, Los Angeles established its GRYD office in 2007 as a comprehensive strategy that sought to reduce gang and gun violence by incorporating direct service to gang-involved individuals through outreach and violence interruption as well as large prevention programming and community-outreach efforts (Brantingham et al. 2021). However, unlike the Spergel or Boston models, the GRYD office operated in parallel to law enforcement; police and outreach coordinated their efforts through a centralized incident review process that allocated outreach services and police suppression as needed, without any appearance of line-level collaboration. Through GRYD, Los Angeles developed one of the first major-city examples of civilianized public safety infrastructure; advancing this effort, in 2011, the city established The Urban Peace Institute as a training academy for the city's growing outreach professionals and community development of CVI programming (Urban Peace Inst. 2024).

By the twentieth century's close, a few American cities retained a rare line of continuity in the provision of street outreach services, albeit in a context where they were secondary to police suppression efforts. But apart from these notable exceptions, in much of the rest of the country, the closing decades represented a time for forgetting the lessons hard won from community-based street outreach work, an approach that was once our main policy response to gangs.

THE PUBLIC HEALTH TURN

Street outreach approaches experienced a resurgence—and, in fact, proliferated—in the early 2000s as part of an exerted research and policy effort to reframe gun violence not as a criminal justice problem but as a threat to public health.[5] The unprecedented rise of gun violence (especially gun homicides) during the 1980s and early-1990s took a staggering toll on American cities that, many argued, reached levels comparable to other public health crises (Blumstein & Wallman 2006). From the 1960s to the mid-1980s, rates of gun homicide more than doubled in the United States, with rates of juvenile gun homicide (14 to 17 years old) more than tripling (Blumstein & Wallman 2006, Wintemute 2015), in the process generating massive racial disparities in key health indicators like life expectancy (Harper et al. 2007, Heron 2007). By 1989, the American Medical Association labeled firearm deaths and injuries a critical public health issue, ushering in new streams of funding, research, and policy debate as well as a larger call to action among public health professionals (Hemenway 2010, Wintemute 2015).

The idea of gun violence as a public health crisis would transform both the practice and science of street outreach. In the early 2000s, physician Gary Slutkin and colleagues at the University of

[5]For an extended discussion of this broader public health approach to gun violence, see Hemenway (2010).

Illinois Chicago developed a model that would eventually be called CureViolence (Cure). The Cure approach was rooted in a literalist conception of gun violence as a contagious disease and consequently aimed to reduce violence by interrupting its direct transmission within gang and street-oriented networks (Slutkin et al. 2015).[6] Given the observed concentration of gun violence in small places and networks (Braga et al. 2010, Papachristos et al. 2013), Cure program theory posited that halting the transmission of violence involved (*a*) identifying potential transmitters of violence (those directly involved in violent conflicts) and changing their thinking; (*b*) inserting public-health-style workers into network positions proximate to transmitters to influence behavior; and (*c*) changing individual, group, and community norms around violence (Butts et al. 2015, Slutkin et al. 2015). In contrast to public health approaches that target the direct vector of infection (e.g., the gun itself) or other proximate contextual factors (e.g., neighborhood conditions), Cure sought to change the norms surrounding gun use. Specifically, Cure aimed to convince individuals embedded in contexts awash with guns and where violence is deemed a necessary means for self-preservation and dispute resolution to avoid using a firearm.[7] Cure theorized that community levels of violence would fall when violence is denormalized among this population (Butts et al. 2015).

On the ground, Cure operationalized its public health approach similarly to earlier outreach programs that elevated the value of local expertise by employing staff familiar with the local context. The frontline structure of Cure programming involved two related roles: violence interrupters and street outreach workers (Butts et al. 2015). Such a differentiation essentially cleaved the traditional outreach worker model in two. Violence interrupters, as the job title suggests, were hired and trained to (*a*) identify ongoing conflicts driving community violence and the individuals animating these conflicts and (*b*) insert themselves into such conflicts to provide immediate on-the-ground conflict mediation that might disrupt the transmission of violence. Outreach workers then worked in tandem with interrupters, acting as a sort of case manager and medium-range problem-solver for individuals embedded in Cure's mediation work or those who were obviously at risk for violent victimization.

Cure's program theory for disrupting the transmission of violence centered on the idea that those doing the work—the interrupters and outreach workers—must be perceived as credible messengers (Butts et al. 2015). Credibility, in this sense, was not associated with formal training in dispute resolution, social work practice, or even experience in a helping profession but, rather, street credibility (Anderson 2000), i.e., lived experience with gun violence and/or impacted local neighborhood contexts (Richardson 2022, Wical et al. 2020). Cure staff typically derived their credibility from previous experience with gun violence, often in the form of gang involvement, prior victimization (or perpetration), and history of contact with the criminal legal system. Cure's program theory posited that such credibility afforded interrupters and outreach workers an understanding of the local contexts and lifestyles of their charges, generated social network bridging connections that could allow workers to develop relationships with the "hard to reach," and provided an authenticity and shared history that could serve as the basis of connection with those that were usually cynical of formal institutions and those offering help.

Centering the importance of credible messengers further distanced Cure from a criminal justice framework and represented a sharp turn away from Spergel's GVRP approach, which had sought to incorporate policing and probation into a comprehensive strategy just a few years

[6]Gary Slutkin (2011), founder of Cure Violence, declared: "That violence is an epidemic is not a metaphor; it is a scientific fact."

[7]This is akin to trying to get individuals to change norms around smoking, condom use, or seatbelt use in other public health efforts.

earlier.[8] Cure contended that the credibility of its interrupters rested on ties to the streets and corollary distance from the police; in contexts of high violence and intensive policing, being seen as a police informant or snitch could obliterate the credibility of an entire outreach staff (Butts et al. 2015). In many cities, Cure publicly distanced itself from police, aggravating an already antagonistic relationship, which had in many instances begun with arrest or hostile interactions between police and outreach staff while they were still involved in street life. As such, for many police, workers' newfound efforts at reducing violence and helping the community were met with open skepticism (Skogan et al. 2009, Klofas et al. 2013). Butts et al. (2015, p. 42), however, report that some Cure sites attempted to foster more positive relationships with police to "assist with access to strategic information on crime patterns and to involve the police in the hiring of OWs [outreach workers] and VIs [violence interrupters]."

The Cure model was met with public fanfare, foundation funding, an Emmy Award–winning documentary [*The Interrupters* (James 2011)] that brought it attention, and widespread policy support, representing a community-centered alternative for addressing violence in an era that still favored a criminal justice response. The program itself and its public health framing spread rapidly in what can be described as a policy cascade (Papachristos 2011). The Chicago program was heralded as a success and was exported to cities and municipalities across the country long before the ink dried on the National Institute of Justice–funded evaluation. When the earliest Chicago results were released, they showed important and statistically significant impacts that, from a scientific perspective, were quite promising. However, the effect sizes were far different from what was being touted publicly (Skogan et al. 2009). Skogan et al.'s (2009) evaluation employed a neighborhood-level quasi-experimental longitudinal analysis of shootings to show that approximately half of Cure's treatment neighborhoods experienced significantly fewer shootings than comparison neighborhoods. Yet additional analyses yielded uneven indicators of impact: Reductions in gun homicide were detected in only one of seven treatment areas, reductions in violence hot spots occurred in three of seven neighborhoods, and reductions in gang homicide networks occurred in two of eight neighborhoods.

These mixed results from the Chicago evaluation did not deter the spread of Cure and Cure-like models across the United States and to other cities around the world (Papachristos 2011). Still, by and large, ensuing evaluations of other Cure and Cure-derived programs produced similarly uneven results. Newark's Operation Ceasefire blended elements of group-based focused deterrence (e.g., see Braga et al. 2014) with Cure's public health approach, using outreach workers and organizing strategies to disrupt gun violence in a two-square-mile treatment area. A quasi-experimental evaluation did not find significant differences in either trauma center admissions or gunshot wound prevalence between the treatment and comparison neighborhoods (Boyle et al. 2010). Pittsburgh's One Vision One Life used Cure's credible messenger model but differed on other program elements (see Wilson & Chermak 2011); its neighborhood-level quasi-experimental evaluation showed that the program had no effect on the incidence of homicide and was associated with a statistically significant increase in aggravated assaults and gun assaults in its treatment neighborhoods. Brooklyn's Save our Streets (SOS) was a Cure replication that also included several community norm-changing campaigns and operated on a much smaller scale, employing four outreach workers who served 96 clients (Picard-Fritsche & Cerniglia 2013).

[8]Although public health approaches sought to position themselves as clear alternatives to criminal policing, as Braga (2022) has noted, it is not a hallmark of public health approaches to forsake partnership with police. For example, efforts to reduce traffic accidents can and do rely on police to enforce traffic laws, perform sobriety checks, etc. Likewise, other public health frameworks to reduce gun violence—such as licensing and background checks—also rely on law enforcement to serve important functions.

Using an interrupted time series method featuring matched comparison neighborhoods, evaluators credited SOS with bringing about an approximate 20% reduction in gun violence relative to comparison neighborhoods. The evaluation of the Phoenix Truce Project, another Cure replication, found that the program was associated with reductions in assaults and all violent incidents (defined expansively) in the treatment area relative to comparison neighborhoods, but unfortunately found an increase in shootings and shots-fired incidents (Fox et al. 2014). Project REASON in Port of Spain, Trinidad was a Cure site that was implemented in 16 high-violence communities. Three distinct types of quasi-experimental analyses indicated that REASON generated large and statistically significant reductions in official reports of violence, police calls for service, and hospital admissions (Maguire et al. 2018).

Baltimore's Safe Streets represented a strict Cure replication accompanied by several rigorous evaluations (Webster et al. 2013). Overseen by the Baltimore City Health Department in conjunction with the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention (the creators of Chicago Cure), Safe Streets received ample training and technical support to ensure fidelity to Cure's program model. Starting in 2007, Safe Streets was implemented in four of Baltimore's highest-violence neighborhoods. Evaluations of the program's early period by Webster and colleagues (2013) found mixed evidence of program impact on nonfatal shootings and homicide due to inconsistent effects across program sites (only one showed significant declines in both homicides and nonfatal shootings). Two ensuing evaluations of Baltimore's Safe Streets broadly confirm the program's mixed or null findings. First, an updated analysis that extended the observation period for the original program sites found mixed and statistically insignificant program effects for nonfatal shootings, whereas results for homicides were generally null but included both statistically significant decreases and increases (Webster et al. 2018). Second, in an effort to overcome previous challenges in identifying appropriate comparison units, the same research team employed synthetic control methodology to revisit earlier estimates of program effects and detect possible long-term effects (Buggs et al. 2022). Results once again revealed mixed outcomes across sites and, in fact, revised earlier findings by concluding that the site-specific impacts suggested "more evidence of harm than benefit" (Buggs et al. 2022, p. 64). Taking advantage of an extended observation period, the researchers found that beneficial impacts reported in earlier Safe Streets evaluations had attenuated over time.[9]

Stepping back, the broader research literature into Cure and Cure-inspired programs highlights both the challenges of evaluating real-world violence intervention programs and the limits of outreach-based violence reduction programs (Buggs 2022, Hureau et al. 2023). In terms of evaluation challenges, the highly politicized nature of gun violence, as well as the urgency of the problem for communities impacted by gun violence, means that even the best efforts at building experimental or quasi-experimental research designs are often undercut by political or real-world demands. Program sites are never selected randomly but are selected precisely because they experience high levels of gun violence, and antiviolence resources frequently find their way to established organizations endowed with political, social, and economic capital (Marwell 2009, Vargas 2016). Initiatives frequently launch at politically expedient moments rather than when prepared with proper staffing, resources, and capacity for data collection. It is no surprise then that early evaluations of Cure-inspired programs often found evidence of implementation failure and frequently cited this implementation failure as a key explanation for mixed impact findings (Hureau et al. 2023).

Methodological innovations like interrupted time series analysis, synthetic control models, and various matching procedures have been used by evaluators of place-based interventions to adjust for some of these real-world contextual challenges. But such area-level evaluations are still often

[9]See Hureau et al. (2023) for an extended review of this literature.

stymied by a lack of data on actual programmatic behaviors that could persuasively link programmatic activities to outcomes as well as competing explanations at the macro-level (e.g., shifts in policing strategies). What is more, place-based evaluations—as well as the handful of contemporary evaluations that have investigated individual-level impacts—have been beset by the additional complications of (*a*) the nonrandom selection of outreach participants and (*b*) the networked nature of gun violence.[10] In terms of selection, outreach participants are almost always selected nonrandomly precisely because they are highly active or at acute levels of risk for involvement in gun violence. Although often guided by formal rules, research has demonstrated that outreach workers also use their own selection criteria—including readiness and likelihood of programmatic success—in their recruitment of outreach participants (see Cheng 2018).[11] What is more, the networked nature of gun violence presents its own evaluation challenge because of the meaningful possibility of treatment spillover effects, which challenge the stable unit treatment value assumption (SUTVA), a core assumption of many causal inference strategies (Hureau et al. 2023). The upshot of both these challenges is that network processes can confound assignment to treatment and comparison conditions and interfere with foundational assumptions regarding the basic nature of treatment effects, problems that even the most rigorous randomized controlled trials (RCTs) cannot overcome without the benefit of networked data.

Most evaluations of Cure and other outreach-based programs have focused primarily on gun violence as the main outcome of interest.[12] Part of this focus on gun violence stems from the emergence of these programs during heightened periods of gun violence. As important, however, was the public health reframing of street outreach efforts as primarily focused on stopping the "epidemic" of gun violence, as opposed to earlier outreach iterations that were more eclectic in their aims. In making violence interruption their central theoretical and programmatic pillar, Cure-inspired programs staked their reputation on their ability to reduce aggregate levels of community gun violence. As such, evaluations of this period typically employed police-defined data like homicides, nonfatal shootings, or calls for shots fired to examine program impact at the community (and, sometimes, individual) level.

Uneven evaluation results did not hinder the proliferation of Cure and Cure-related outreach models or the relative staying power of outreach. On the contrary, we view the reframing of gun violence as a public health issue as a significant development in the history of street outreach that likely sustained the profession through the 2000s, paving the way for new innovations in the field. Furthermore, Cure's emphasis on using credible messengers as its frontline workforce amplified the value of hiring, training, and developing a labor force that had been largely ignored or locked out of most conventional employment opportunities. Cure's unrelenting support of this pillar of its model meant that cities across the country were increasingly turning to local experts—many of whom were Black and Latino men who lived through mass incarceration, intensive policing, and concentrated exposure to gun violence—to help implement violence prevention efforts. Cure and its offspring programs undoubtedly deserve credit for producing a generation of leaders in

[10]See Ross et al. (2023) for a discussion of how selection bias affects nearly all individual-level research on CVI programs.

[11]A recent outreach effort in Chicago, READI (Rapid Employment and Development Initiative)-Chicago (Bhatt et al. 2024), attempted to randomize at least some participants into its programming. Yet even this effort was based on a nonrandom network-based algorithm derived from the work of Green et al. (2017), thus including high levels of interdependencies. What is more, outreach workers found it difficult to reach selected individuals with whom they did not have prior relationships and credibility.

[12]Important exceptions include pre–post surveys examining changes in perceptions of safety and attitudes toward gun violence in the evaluation of Brooklyn's SOS (Picard-Fritsche & Cerniglia 2013) and one of the studies of Baltimore's Safe Streets (Webster et al. 2012).

the field that emerged from the ranks of violence interrupters and outreach workers. Nearly two decades after its founding, many original Cure staff members in Chicago and other cities serve as high-profile leaders in violence prevention, head their own organizations, or are moving outward to direct established antiviolence initiatives throughout Chicago and across the country.[13]

On the other side of the ledger, Cure's heavy emphasis on interruption—and corresponding focus on gun violence as the main outcome of the work—likely obscured other core neighborhood-building and public safety activities that had been long-standing parts of the tradition of street outreach. In this sense, as Cure became widely understood as a violence interruption program, and in the process popularizing and expanding opportunity for street outreach work, it also simultaneously generated conditions for organizational isomorphism, wherein doing outreach came to mean following the Cure approach to ensure external legitimacy and secure (emerging streams of) funding. Thus, despite reinvigorating and building the field in myriad ways—including the development of funding opportunities to support the work—Cure's operationalization and various replications may have inadvertently tamped down opportunities for other innovations in outreach practice dedicated to aims beyond violence interruption.

DEFINING THE PRESENT MOMENT: FROM PUBLIC HEALTH TO PUBLIC SAFETY

Attempting to define the present moment as it is unfolding is risky, especially in a rapidly evolving domain like street outreach. Although, on the surface, contemporary outreach program theory is still largely derived from the Cure/public health model of violence interruption, emerging programs also contain echoes of classic sociological theories of community change as well as whispers of new behavioral science. In spite of the variation in program models, we believe that some core features are coming into focus in what represents an emerging street outreach paradigm that transcends the public health turn in the history of the field. Specifically, we understand the still developing generation of outreach programs to be defined by the larger societal imperative to develop capacity for civilianized public safety capable of responding to violence under enduring conditions of social inequality.

As with the Cure era, contemporary street outreach programming represents a response to alarming increases in gun violence. Between 2019 and 2020, the United States experienced its largest single-year increase in gun violence since the 1980s, with a nearly 35% increase in gun homicides (CDC 2022). But the problem was not solely gun violence. The aforementioned increases unfolded alongside the global COVID-19 pandemic as well as widespread social protests against police violence. Amid calls to defund and abolish the police, policymakers needed an immediate response to the country's latest gun violence epidemic, and violence interruption-style outreach approaches offered a ready-made alternative that was already familiar to both political and community leaders. The Cure model had already done much of the hard work in distinguishing outreach as a public health model separate from criminal justice approaches, adding legitimacy to the idea that its approach could potentially supplant core criminal justice functions in responding to violence. As the ongoing COVID response continued to reverberate in policy spaces, the essential work of violence interruption was likened to that of frontline healthcare workers (Kohrman 2020).

Although Cure may have prepared the policy space, the outreach-based models that proliferated in this period were not carbon copies of Cure. Instead, they represent an eclectic and

[13]In fact, former Cure outreach workers currently hold violence-prevention leadership positions in nonprofit organizations, major philanthropic foundations, the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, and even the Department of Justice.

overlapping set of programmatic influences ranging from positive youth development and cognitive behavioral therapy (e.g., ROCA; see Swan et al. 2021), Kingian nonviolence (e.g., the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago; see Sweeney 2017), paid peacemaking fellowships and mentoring (e.g., Advance Peace; see Corburn et al. 2022b), and transitional employment and case management [e.g., Rapid Employment and Development Initiative (READI)-Chicago and Chicago Creating Real Economic Destiny (CRED); see Bhatt et al. 2024 and Ross et al. 2023]. Although this emerging slate of programs still makes use of credible messenger–styled street outreach workers, there has been a trend of using such workers to identify programming participants involved in gun violence, mediate immediate conflicts, and then hand off these participants to more structured programming (especially cognitive behavioral therapy and transitional employment) designed to spur lasting behavioral change.

The emerging research from these new outreach-guided efforts has generally reflected a focus on individual change through behavioral shifts or nudges rather than community or group change. Much like earlier periods of outreach research, contemporary evaluations have also produced mixed results, especially with respect to programmatic impact on reducing violent victimization. Evaluations of three programs using various experimental and quasi-experimental designs—READI Chicago (Bhatt et al. 2024), Chicago CRED (Ross et al. 2023), and the Gang Reduction Initiative of Denver (GRID) (Pyrooz et al. 2023)—showed statistically significant decreases in arrests rates of outreach participants for violence as compared to comparison groups of nonparticipants but no statistically significant decreases in gunshot victimization. Thus, although these programs have produced some important changes among outreach participants—specifically reducing their likelihood of arrest in gun-related crimes and violence—with respect to perhaps the key pillar of outcome assessment, gunshot victimization, they have once again generated largely null results. It is important to underscore that the most current wave of program evaluation, with its individualist logics, has turned even more sharply toward causal inference when compared to the research of previous eras but has returned similar findings.[14]

What might at first appear like an individualist turn, though, is actually more complicated. Alongside programmatic strategies that emphasize individual change and require ever-more-sophisticated data tracking and case management capabilities, CVI organizations on the ground are looking for much more. Seasoned CVI practitioners, with years of frontline experience intervening in violence as well as struggling to find support for both their work and under-resourced communities, want the best individual services for their participants, but also conceive of gun violence as a complex phenomenon requiring coordinated and layered extra-individual interventions. After all, even the best individual-level programming cannot overcome the entrenched and unforgiving contexts of gun violence that organize much of social life in historically marginalized communities. Interrogating the lack of impact on victimization rates in the evaluation of CRED, Ross et al. (2023) noted that many participants who were shot after program participation had achieved nearly all programmatic goals: They completed programming, obtained a high school diploma, and even stopped carrying guns. Victimization still happened because, as one CRED participant explained it, "Playing defense (disengaging from group conflicts and gun violence) can only go so far if the rest of the neighborhood is still playing offense" (Ross et al. 2023, p. 6). Thus, even when individual change unquestionably occurred, broader neighborhood contexts still posed risks that could drive individual victimization. Individual programming is limited without attention to shifting basic community conditions and dynamics that perpetuate violence.

Rather than a perceived individual turn, we argue that the more important story emerging from CVI practice at this moment is a move back toward more holistic community-centered approaches

[14]For a review on the turn toward causality and policy in criminology, see Sampson et al. (2013).

to outreach and public safety. In cities across the country, CVI organizations are forming interorganizational collaborations, developing and standardizing outreach worker training and education, making claims on city and state budgets to support CVI work and historically marginalized communities, assisting the implementation of city- and state-based offices for gun violence prevention, and even lobbying to scale outreach and CVI efforts to reach degrees of saturation similar to policing. In short, born from the limits of chasing short-term violence reduction and the funding associated with it, outreach and CVI organizations have become key protagonists in developing a broader civilianized public safety infrastructure supported by both public and private investment.

Understanding the current moment in street outreach requires developing our theoretical understanding of the work, recognizing the ways that the field could change, and advancing new paradigms of empirical research to better comprehend the activities of outreach workers, outreach organizations, and their larger efforts to become established as part of an emerging safety infrastructure. Among other shifts, this requires moving well beyond de rigueur evaluation approaches that prioritize measuring program impacts on individual risk of violence and toward the inclusion of more eclectic methods, especially those that bring forth community insights and the lived experiences of workers. We provide a few examples in the ensuing section before outlining promising—and necessary—new lines of inquiry. Perhaps more importantly, though, in this moment of transition, we must meet the challenge of revising our theories of what outreach is as well as what it can be. And, in this effort, both the past and the present can serve as important guides—as can outreach workers themselves.

DISCUSSION: TOWARD COMMUNITY SAFETY AND THE STUDY OF IT

As contemporary practitioners and organizations attempt to transcend the limitations of standard outreach approaches, researchers too can benefit from reflecting upon the corresponding limits of scientific approaches that have come to define street outreach research. It is important to recognize that even as outreach organizations are stressed by interrupting the next shooting, they also see the transformative possibilities inherent in their work. Among today's outreach workers, we observe an obvious striving against the siloed efforts of individual programs to reduce violence and a weariness of attempts to achieve short-term violence reductions from a narrow and formulaic outreach approach that has generally returned mixed results (see Hureau et al. 2023). Across the field of outreach itself, leading organizations are increasingly attempting to leave behind an era of bitter competition for scarce resources, instead opting to collaborate on matters of training, professional standards, and worker wellness. In the process, CVI organizations are knitting together various outreach and safety-promoting efforts that attempt to weave together a larger civilianized public safety fabric (Rogers & Gross 2023).

The discussion and conclusion of this article offer guiding thoughts regarding the path forward for a science of street outreach rooted in the profession's actual practice and better attuned to the contours of this rapidly developing field. We conclude by considering how the scientific study of violence prevention might be restructured to better reflect the activities of outreach workers, draw attention to pressing matters in the field that have been underexamined, document power shifts in the field of public safety, and, ultimately, promote a better understanding of outreach work and its various forms of efficacy among policymakers and the public.

Understanding the Work and the Workforce

The current research emphasis on violence prevention has obfuscated an expansive array of outreach activities, including vital community-building functions, that—especially for policymakers—fall outside of direct violence intervention activities like conflict mediations or

interruptions (for important exceptions, see Cheng 2017, Free 2020, Smith & Mendoza 2023). As a result, it has proven difficult to offer an analytic portrait of outreach work as well as enumerate the various activities outreach workers perform in daily practice. A recent research partnership in Chicago between the twelve-organization CVI collaborative known as Communities Partnering 4 Peace (CP4P) and Northwestern University jointly created a unique project that provides insight into the daily activities of outreach workers, including the extent and types of contacts workers have with their charges (Cent. Neighb. Engag. Res. Sci. 2023). Over a five-year period from 2018 to 2023, outreach workers from CP4P partner organizations provided 199,602 services to at least 5,516 unique participants; on average, participants received approximately 12 recorded contacts (but undoubtedly many more informal contacts). The most common type of outreach contact was mentoring (which 60% of participants received), consisting of informal street counseling, social and emotional support, and the basic expression of human care that outreach workers provide their participants. The second most common type of contact pertained to employment services (50%), with outreach staff helping participants look for—or manage participation in—a job or job training program. Direct violence prevention activities, such as mediating a conflict or negotiating a nonaggression agreement, ranked as the third most common type of contact (40%). Other services regularly performed included mental and physical health referrals, housing and legal assistance, and victim advocacy.

An improved understanding of the breadth of quotidian outreach work only offers hints of its depth and character. Although outreach workers engage individual participants—often embedded in group contexts—the practice of street outreach remains undoubtedly community centered. Full comprehension of how outreach workers "do violence prevention" requires recognition of the relational and networked nature of CVI practice. Concretely, outreach workers tap into interpersonal, familial, organizational, and neighborhood networks to take stock of current violent conflicts, identify those involved, and activate the networks of fellow outreach workers to intervene before violence further intensifies (Free 2020, Hureau et al. 2023). The practice of canvassing, referenced earlier in the article, is the core task of walking or driving around a community, talking to its residents, developing connections with formal and informal institutions and guardians, and establishing trusting relationships that can assist in mediating conflicts. When done with intention, canvassing represents the practical instantiation of the knitting together of various community capacities—what earlier theorists might have referred to as the coordination of social orders or spheres (Hunter 1995)—to prevent violence. Through canvassing, workers gather crucial information, build direct relationships with those engaged in violence as well as those who can influence their behavior, and develop working relational maps of formal and informal community resources and vulnerabilities. To this end, interventionists are consistently challenged to forge relationships with individual clients within the context of overlapping gang structures, which are nothing if not a network of individuals linked through a tangle of neighborhood, familial, and interpersonal ties (Sierra-Arevalo & Papachristos 2015). These sorts of individual, group, and institutional connections are the lifeblood of the work.

The act of canvassing and the range of other services outreach workers provide are not merely activities in service of individual clients but are community-building actions, generating links among formal and informal community institutions. Among individuals embedded in networks of gun violence, levels of mistrust, cynicism, and legal estrangement are exceedingly high (Papachristos et al. 2012), with qualitative research showing that street-involved young people often take extreme measures to avoid the educational, healthcare, and criminal legal systems (Goffman 2009, Harding 2010, Stuart 2020). Trusting people—and trusting purportedly helping institutions—does not come easily for many outreach participants. Although outreach worker credibility has most often been invoked for its role in violence intervention, an underappreciated

dimension of worker credibility is its utility in moving personal and informal relationships with clients into formal and institutional relationships with organizations that can provide specialized services to support them without engaging the criminal legal system. Through such brokerage efforts (see Free 2020), workers not only reach individuals and groups with some of the highest-level cynicism and mistrust of formal systems, but they also create new ties between institutions and residents while also generating crucial neighborhood knowledge and pathways for diagnosing and understanding issues of violence.[15] In short, we believe that the community-building and social integration functions of outreach practice merit greater appreciation and attention.

The Burgeoning Field of Community Violence Intervention

Just as outreach workers do much more than violence intervention work, outreach organizations also do much more than staff teams to stop shootings. Much like earlier outreach programs, many contemporary outreach organizations consider their primary function as fostering neighborhood networks that could be used to bolster community informal social control and collective efficacy, operating as core neighborhood social actors that provide much needed resources and support to communities that they also frequently mobilize. Outreach organizations across the country (*a*) serve as employers, hiring principally Black and Latino individuals that have experienced prior justice system contact; (*b*) act as employment, education, and resource hubs providing links to services, including legal and health services and referrals; (*c*) provide essential goods and services to participants, families, and other community members, including food, clothing, housing, access to mental health services, school supplies, etc.; and (*d*) coordinate and mobilize community action, including marches, public events, voter drives, candlelight vigils, funeral services, protests, and other collective actions. The myriad of CVI organizations acting during the early months of the COVID pandemic illustrates this point (Corburn et al. 2022a, Everytown Res. Policy 2020, Northwest. Neighb. Netw. Initiat. 2020, Ren et al. 2023, Sanchez & Pyrooz 2023). In some cities, outreach workers were designated essential workers and, in addition to their normal violence prevention duties, handed out personal protective equipment (masks), food, and medical and vaccine information to their communities; some outreach workers even brought hard copies of student's schoolwork to their homes, yet another essential function for students without access to computers or the Internet. And most did such work without the additional hazard pay afforded other essential workers and first responders.

Outreach organizations have also risen to assume significant coordination roles for broader violence prevention efforts within and across communities. During earlier periods, many outreach organizations—especially within particular cities—experienced intense competition over resources and funding (e.g., Vargas 2019) or were simply marginal to citywide power structures. Although resource competition inevitably still occurs (and could intensify again as the field expands), there has been considerable growth in collaboration across organizations with a push for the standardization of pay scales, training and education, and even resource sharing. For example, many cities—including Chicago and Los Angeles—have developed violence prevention training academies that prepare new workers for the job, provide ongoing training and education for staff, and act as a central hub for communication across organizations (Davies 2022, Urban Peace Initiat.

[15] Relationships and trust between participants and outreach staff frequently strengthen over time, with workers engaging participants in other domains of their lives beyond conflicts. For example, outreach workers help their participants navigate the healthcare, educational, and criminal justice systems by accompanying them on doctor's visits, teacher meetings, and court proceedings (Cheng 2017, 2018; Pollack et al. 2011). Outreach workers further serve as mentors and trusted individuals who help participants get ready for job interviews, often helping them get suitable clothes and even driving them to interviews (Cheng 2017, Free 2020).

2024). This sort of coordination across agencies, especially pertaining to training, credentialing, and education, signals an important step in the increasing professionalization of the violence intervention field, increasing the range of development possibilities and career paths available to outreach staff.

What is more, collaboration across outreach-focused organizations has reached new heights through organizations advocating for policy architecture that centers community-based approaches, making claims on the state to provide resources that both directly prevent violence and address the conditions that allow violence to flourish (Rogers & Gross 2023). Many of the organizations referenced in this article have risen as leaders in developing strategies for advancing an agenda that opens up opportunities for community violence writ large—rather than solely benefiting their own organization.[16] For example, successful fundraising and lobbying efforts have allowed the California-based Advanced Peace to expand its Peacemaker Fellowship into multiple California cities, including Stockton, Richmond, and Sacramento (Corburn et al. 2022b). Chicago CRED, for example, has helped lead the charge in Chicago by hosting citywide convenings, crafting policy messaging, and bringing together disparate organizations in efforts to generate broader-based policy support for CVI work (Stevens 2024). Recent efforts have also tried to establish a national office that is helping to coordinate a national leadership academy for CVI managers (Schuba 2023). Formal and informal coalitions of outreach organizations have also led the charge on establishing offices for violence prevention at the city and state levels, creating direct lines of communication and the flow of resources (including funding) between the state and community groups. National meetings, conferences, and associations have been established that bring together outreach practitioners from across the country to share best practices and create forums for dialogue among researchers, policymakers, and funders. One of the foremost indicators of the power of these new collaborations is the fact of outreach and other CVI leaders being appointed to serve in government offices, leadership at major foundations, and national organizations, bringing further credibility to CVI work and attention to violence prevention efforts in these spaces.

Toward a New Science of Street Outreach

With respect to the scientific study of street outreach, we believe that the intellectual agenda has been too narrow for too long. The shift away from the community-centered and theoretically informed classic era of the mid-century period to the largely individualistic public health era has, with some exceptions, led to failures in accurately theorizing or empirically capturing the realities of contemporary outreach practice. For reasons good and bad, the demand for academic expertise in understanding street outreach has been anchored in evaluation science, whose very power stems from the narrowness of the question it seeks to answer: Does it work? Although impact evaluations of street outreach will remain a necessary part of the CVI research portfolio, we contend that street outreach, practice, policy, and science would be improved by an expansion of the analytic and theoretical frame that (re)focuses on the people that perform street outreach, their relationships with clients, the increasing formalization and professionalization of street outreach work, and the ongoing power shifts that are reorienting the organizational field—including its place within the shifting politics of public safety. Doing so would not only provide a deeper understanding of the practice of outreach but might very well provide deeper insights into the matter of programmatic impact as well. In essence, we are calling for a shift in scholarly attention from the question of "Does it work?" toward the more basic question of "What is the work?"

[16]Although many national gun violence prevention centers (e.g., the Giffords Law Center, Everytown for Gun Safety, and Mom's Demand Action) had begun exploring CVI programming prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and murder of George Floyd, their advocacy and funding efforts increased dramatically after 2020 and have helped contribute to growing national debates and strategies.

In doing so, we are asking for more than social scientists to simply keep up with basic shifts in the field, although there is plenty of keeping up to be done. More directly, we believe the field is reaching—or may have already reached—the limits of what even the most advanced contemporary evaluation approaches can offer, especially if violence continues to serve as the primary outcome of interest. Methodologically sophisticated contemporary program evaluations have thus far returned many of the same mixed results as their predecessors, specifically finding that recent programs have not reduced violent victimization among the program participants they served (Bhatt et al. 2024, Ross et al. 2023).

We are troubled less by these results themselves and more by the paradigm they might inspire for future research. If the study of outreach continues in its current form, focused on short-term violence reduction effects and privileging causal inference at the expense of developing other kinds of knowledge, it might very well lead to the extinction of the practice as we have known it. For those who believe that the only credible policy knowledge can be obtained through experimental studies (especially randomized control trials), as well as for those who strictly interpret the idea that public policy should be guided by evidence, Malcolm Klein's wish to eliminate street outreach programming is well within sight. Beginning with the null results returned from recent RCTs, and integrating the stacking of mixed results from studies across decades, street outreach detractors and natural skeptics would have little trouble in making a case against policy investment on evidentiary grounds. As practitioners have struggled to defend outreach practice as data informed, researchers have responded by bringing bigger guns to the fight, drawing upon highly powered RCT designs that only a handful of American cities could practically (or even mathematically) pull off, only to find limited programmatic impact on violence reduction.

Under this pressure to prove program efficacy, another kind of existential threat to street outreach practice has also emerged: a fundamental change to its guiding theory. A practice that was for nearly all its history rooted in a commitment to changing communities, has, partly because of a shift toward methodological individualism and the need for statistical power, been increasingly interpreted by some leading programs as one that should focus on reforming violent people. For such programs, although outreach engages those most directly engaged in gun violence, outreach workers are no longer the key protagonists in reducing violence. Instead, outreach workers find and connect to people involved in community violence, but the job of transforming them is transferred to specialized service delivery professionals in an office setting (Hureau et al. 2023).

In our view, the way out of the current research and policy evidence predicament is not through bigger and more powerful randomized trials but through a meaningful shift in theoretical frames and empirical methodologies (Hureau et al. 2023, Ross et al. 2023). In particular, we propose a pivot toward research that better aligns with—and examines—the practice of outreach itself, the people doing the work, and the various community and institutional relationships that compose the field of outreach. The warrants for this shift are both basic/natural (in addressing the need to understand the work of outreach beyond short-term violence reduction) and strategic (representing an opportunity to demonstrate to policymakers outreach's role in promoting public safety, social integration, and community health). As a case in point, consider how the social scientific community has largely been unable to coherently unpack the current research base. We are unable to guide policy and explain the observed limited effects of outreach on violence because there has been so little attention given in contemporary evaluation efforts to the theory of outreach practice and data collected on outreach worker activities that are theorized to influence various outcomes (Hureau et al. 2023). For some, these results will simply represent a bottom line that outreach programs do not work, and that will be enough. But given the paucity of research evidence, other plausible explanations for the accumulation of mixed and null results—including

the underfunding of predominantly Black- and Latino-led organizations (Buggs 2022), underscaled programs that do not reach the right people (see Wilson & Chermak 2011), and insufficient dosage to those served by outreach programs (see Ross et al. 2023)—cannot be ruled in or out.

As the power base for street outreach programs continues to move from one anchored in public health interruption to one driven by civilianized public safety, an opportunity is created for both academics and practitioners to examine a broader set of programmatic outcomes. Programs that may have been previously understood as failures under the paradigm of violence intervention might be recontextualized as effective in delivering other public safety benefits (Hureau 2023, Ross et al. 2023). This is not an argument for wishing away the discouraging research evidence in street outreach; it is instead an invitation to generate a new science of outreach that does more to better inform policymakers and practitioners.

We believe that a new science of street outreach should develop along four critical dimensions. First and foremost, the science of outreach needs to extend its focus well beyond violence and unapologetically re-center community processes, structures, dynamics, and institutions. We understand that some will consider this recommendation wrongheaded, that what is needed now more than ever is a relentless focus on violence (Abt 2019). However, we are not arguing that the research community should abandon violence but, rather, that it should not singularly prioritize it to the exclusion of investigating the broader impacts that outreach may have on the communities they serve.

The methodological limitations of the current violence-centric approach reveal why examining a broader range of outcomes could be useful for researchers and practitioners alike. For example, gun violence in contemporary research is typically defined based on police data on fatal and nonfatal shootings. Even when using the best available data, rates of individual gun violence victimization are statistically rare and trying to detect them among small populations requires sample sizes far beyond the capacity of even the best-funded programs. As a case in point, the well-resourced READI program recruited more than 1,500 participants but was still largely underpowered to detect gunshot victimization (Bhatt et al. 2024). Further complicating matters is the fact that many outreach programs select participants based on prior gunshot victimization. This means that failure is not simply victimization but repeat victimization, which, although it does occur, does so at an even lower rate.

In conjunction with a better understanding of the on-the-ground work of outreach, such limitations warrant a proactive move toward extending the science of outreach to include broader sets of outcomes and research foci. One of the most pressing needs is to design research projects to accurately capture community-level outcomes, processes, and structures. At a minimum, researchers need to capture nonviolence-focused metrics that directly relate to program theory and practice. At the individual level, some starting points might include understanding and measuring perceptions of safety and well-being; self-reported activities, behaviors, opinions, and attitudes; and indicators of increased participation and engagement in community and civic life. At the community level, researchers need only look to the practice of outreach itself to understand key areas in need of inquiry, many of which already have solid footing in the sociological and criminological literatures. Along this line, the science of outreach should adapt methods of inquiry from the neighborhood effects and social movements literatures to capture community-level metrics of safety, well-being, and civic engagement.

This first dimension leads logically (and imperatively) to the second: The science of outreach needs a rapid extension of methods from a wider range of disciplines and scholars. The current hyperfocus on violence has been supported by the dogmatic perspective that only formal causal models—and specifically "gold-standard" methods like randomized control trials—are able to provide tangible evidence of program efficacy. Standard econometrics approaches contend that

randomization is the best way to address issues of selection bias while providing the most suitable comparison groups when detecting treatment effects (Sampson et al. 2013).

Yet in practice, even the best-designed randomization procedures often ignore the realities of gun violence and the politics of gun violence prevention that undermine traditional research designs. The decidedly nonrandom concentration of gun violence within small geographic places and small social networks means selecting randomly from high-risk populations potentially produces individuals and events that are directly or indirectly connected to each other and the smaller the selection criteria, the greater the likelihood of interdependence among cases (see Ross et al. 2023). The evaluation of READI (Bhatt et al. 2024), for example, used an RCT design but did not acknowledge the networked nature of gun violence in its randomization process (i.e., accounting for gang or network embeddedness). The CRED evaluation attempted to model the interdependencies of networks but still faced nearly identical issues around selection biases and statistical power (Ross et al. 2023).

Attempting to model the community-level impacts of outreach on violence generates similar difficulties. Communities implementing outreach programs are never selected randomly but rather are selected precisely because they have extreme levels of gun violence; what is more, program implementation rarely if ever rolls out along randomized timelines or implementation plans (Buggs 2022). Such realities of real-world implementation often lead researchers to employ quasi-experimental methods to select comparison areas, especially various matching or synthetic control procedures (Buggs et al. 2022, Saunders et al. 2015). Such methods can be limited in their capacity to find suitable comparison areas for nonrandom treatment areas and account for potential confounding due to the presence of multiple interventions occurring in these communities.

We thus urge a much-needed broadening in the types of methods used to investigate outreach work. More than that, we need to ensure that policymakers and funders understand that not only is the "gold-standard" framing misleading but also that methods other than experiments and quasi-experiments can be equally as rigorous and generative for the scientific needs of the field. Understanding community-centered processes at the heart of outreach and CVI will require continued quantitative analyses of official data but also the collection of new survey and administrative data generated from outside of criminal justice spaces. Observational, ethnographic, and interview data need to delve into the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of outreach workers as well as the outreach organizations and larger community and political contexts in which they unfold. Furthermore, there is an urgency in ensuring that those with lived experiences are part of the research process itself, helping to design, analyze, interpret, and disseminate this research to those making decisions impacting their lives (Frey et al. 2020, Parsons et al. 2023, Sou Lee & Leverso 2023). Equally urgent is the need to elevate the work of Black and Latino scholars, whose work has often been underacknowledged or outright ignored, in this space and the gun violence space more broadly (Arnold Ventur. 2023).

Research must do more to directly consider the street outreach workforce itself. Summarizing the outreach research literature of the mid-twentieth century, Malcolm Klein argued that the basic theory of street outreach programs was, "the program is worker; the worker is the program" (Klein 1971, p. 158). From the CAP through CureViolence, the idea that the worker's identity was crucial to program success has been generally assumed. But Klein's argument pointed to how workers influence the logic of street outreach theory; his view was not that outreach workers should be credible messengers but that in detached settings, where supervision is difficult to enact, even the best formal program theory is trumped by the common-sense theories that outreach workers hold. On the other hand, it is important to note that where program theory is thin or lacking, it is outreach workers themselves that give it life. More than 50 years on from Klein's challenge to study outreach workers and their understanding of the work, and spanning a range of program theories

and an accumulation of mixed evaluation results, we regret that few scholars have a dedicated interest in this matter (for exceptions, see Cheng 2018 and Free et al. 2023).

Apart from a handful of descriptions of workers in reports, systematic knowledge of the demographics and common work experiences of the street outreach workforce has been lacking until relatively recently. Two recent studies, by the Giffords Center for Violence Intervention (2021) and Hureau et al. (2022a), have attempted to provide broader knowledge of the contemporary street outreach workforce. Drawing from a sample of workers in Chicago, Los Angeles, Oakland, and Baltimore, the Giffords study reported that 78% of the workers surveyed identified as men and 78% identified as Black, and the mean age of workers was 44 years (Giffords Cent. Violence Interv. 2021). Hureau et al.'s (2022a) near census of Chicago workers, as well as unpublished results from New York State, report nearly the same demographic patterns. Both studies also found that workers generally exhibited low levels of formal education, with the vast majority of workers possessing a high-school degree (or equivalent) as their highest level of education attained (Giffords Cent. Violence Interv. 2021, Hureau et al. 2022a). Partially explaining the middle-aged status of the typical worker, Hureau et al. (2022a) found that nearly 80% of workers in Chicago had experienced incarceration, often for long stretches of their twenties and thirties. Regarding these demographics holistically, these new findings suggest that the outreach workforce, in a range of American cities, is mostly middle-aged Black men, with low levels of formal education, that have experienced often lengthy bouts of incarceration. The characteristics of this population raise important questions for future research, including how outreach work influences short-term and long-term reentry processes, how workers are hired and selected by organizations (and how workers demonstrate sufficient distance as well as proximity to street life), how workers understand the causes of violence in the communities they serve, and how these logics influence service delivery.

This emerging line of research also makes clear that the work impacts the workers across a range of health, safety, and economic indicators. Chicago interventionists are exposed to extreme levels of gun violence through their work responsibilities: Nearly 20% had been shot at while on duty, and more than 2% had been shot and hit by gunfire—numbers that exceeded the gun violence exposure of Chicago police (Hureau et al. 2022a). Moreover, the work is not just physically dangerous but can also be psychologically traumatizing. The Giffords study demonstrated that an overwhelming majority of workers exhibited severe levels of psychological distress, as measured by formal scales (Giffords Cent. Violence Interv. 2021). Free & MacDonald's (2019) qualitative investigation of 37 outreach workers in a northeast city similarly reported high levels of trauma, but their sample appeared to be primarily impacted by secondary traumatic stress (STS)—the traumatic stress associated with serving traumatized people. Hureau et al. (2022b) examined STS among the population of Chicago workers, finding that STS was common and significantly worsened by direct gun violence exposure, which was typical for the profession. Free & MacDonald's (2022) interviews with workers describe some of the behavioral impacts of such secondary stress, including avoidance, hypervigilance, burnout, substance use, strained personal relationships, and risky behavior. Bocanegra & Aguilar's (2024) interview-based research further centers workers' traumatic histories—which workers experience as both resources and liabilities—as crucial for understanding how workers are impacted by their clients. For Bocanegra & Aguilar (2024), interventionists' deep relationships with clients can promote healing from trauma for both parties but can also risk reactivating old wounds among workers, bringing them harm for which they struggle to find organizational or interpersonal support. With recent research establishing the basic facts of outreach worker work-related exposure to violence and trauma, more research is needed regarding workers' personal histories of violence exposure, the relationship between personal and professional exposure to violence, how workers manage

their traumas within professional contexts, and how various types of exposure impact worker well-being, employment retention and satisfaction, and performance.

Complicating matters is the fact that the above acute work stressors appear to be occurring within a context of chronic economic stress and hardship for outreach practitioners. Although the four-city Giffords study did not report a mean salary for workers, it did demonstrate that the vast majority of workers surveyed earned between $30,000 and $50,000 per year, with most earning below $42,000 (Giffords Cent. Violence Interv. 2021). The mean salary for Chicago interventionists was $39,382 (Hureau et al. 2022a). Both studies reported that overwhelming majorities of workers felt that their salary was not enough to meet the needs of family, found high proportions of workers engaged in second jobs, and revealed that majorities of workers worry about their ability to pay for housing expenses. Given the demographic profile of outreach workers, these findings establish a warrant for future research to investigate outreach work as an employment intervention, research into how the work impacts the economic and social mobility of workers, and calls for a broader study of outreach worker careers.

Finally, we contend that a new science of street outreach must examine the organizational field of CVI work, including its relationships to broader public safety actors and the state. As noted above, one of the most significant developments in recent years has been the building of what sociologists have termed an organizational field: a set of organizations that constitute a recognized area of institutional life and produce similar sorts of products, services, and outcomes (Fligstein & McAdam 2012). Understanding how organizations in this burgeoning CVI space interact with each other is vital not just for science but for the ongoing development of the field itself. Will the growing number of organizations in this space expand collaboration, generate competition funding and political attention, or both? Will CVI and outreach organizations in the current era lead to a broadening of styles and types of organizations or will being an outreach organization become more narrowly defined by a circumscribed set of behaviors?

As important as understanding how various outreach and CVI entities interact with each other is the manner in which they interact with other state and non-state actors, especially those within the broader domain of public safety. Drawing upon long-standing logics of employing credible messengers, many outreach organizations continue to espouse a sharp demarcation in their relationships with police agencies. That is, credibility as an outreach worker stems directly from connections to the street and not being seen as part of the police apparatus—or, worse, being seen as a police informant. Edgar, a long-time outreach worker in Chicago described to one of the authors: "If the guys (participants) think I'm passing along information to the cops, that's it. Game over. I'm not kidding. It's that serious. It's kinda worse than that, though, because it could endanger my family. You feel me? If they think I'm snitching, they [gangs] might come after me."

Some outreach organizations are being forced to reflect more intently on this relationship because of the growth of public funding dedicated to CVI and the development of new offices of violence prevention in cities and states. Whereas some programs are holding fast to fierce divides with the police, others are trying to develop methods to coexist without direct collaboration; a "staying in our own lane" approach, as one leader of a Chicago outreach organization relayed to one of the authors. "We can't formally work with the police, or even be seen as working with the police. But we need to have a working relationship with the local (police) commanders. They need to know our guys are out there, doing their part and not to mess with our staff. They also have to make sure to clear cases (make arrests) when shootings happen. They gotta do their thing (make arrests) and we gotta do ours." One pioneering model espousing this "sharing lanes" philosophy is Los Angeles' GRYD office, which developed a triangle approach that reviewed all shootings that occurred in specified areas and, through a joint process, determined the appropriate response agency across police, the GRYD staff, and community-based street outreach workers (Brantingham et al. 2021).

This relationship between CVI organizations and the state is extending well beyond police departments. Outreach organizations are also navigating relationships with public safety efforts in hospitals, schools, and neighborhood councils and are even sitting on government commissions and committees—including those with budgetary and policy powers. Increasingly, outreach workers and organizations are being prioritized as key actors in some cities' plans to develop alternative response models (Spolum et al. 2023).

CONCLUSION

> If the fact of a disorganized community is in any way symptomatic of underlying and pervasive processes, then recreation or any other segmental activity which is held out as a panacea must be regarded as limited in its possibilities. Similarly, it will be increasingly clear that the experiments with community organization on a purely local scale will prove themselves ineffectual. While the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council is not held out as the nostrum for the reconciliation of irreconcilable conflicts, in its basic framework it may be regarded as suggesting the direction in which the problems of social life in complex societies can be met with greater hope of success than previous philosophies of community organization.
>
> —Saul Alinsky (1941, p. 808)

Before gaining fame as one of the most effective community organizers of the twentieth century, Saul Alinsky was a street outreach worker. Alinsky originally entered Chicago's rough and tumble Back of the Yards community in 1938 as a worker on assignment from the CAP. As described earlier, CAP emphasized the role of social context over individual pathology in causing delinquency, advancing a philosophy of community power and self-help over the paternalistic offerings of the existing social work establishment of the time. Yet Alinsky, and even CAP's founder Clifford Shaw, doubted CAP's approach would be transformative enough to alter the community conditions that allowed juvenile delinquency to flourish (Horwitt 1992). CAP's responses to community problems were too fragmented, Alinsky argued, and the program was too cozy with industrialist benefactors and city hall to challenge intense poverty and destitution (e.g., Snodgrass 1976). In response, Alinsky developed an organizing approach that sought to unify the fragmented neighborhood response through juvenile delinquency programming, labor organizing, and the formation of strategic alliances within the Catholic Archdiocese. Together, this sort of coalition would not simply attempt to address the area's needs but also directly confront power structures outside the community responsible for the misery that persisted within it. What Alinsky started during his time as a humble street outreach worker would evolve into one of the paradigmatic pro-democracy and pro-citizenship social movements of the post-Depression era.

Perhaps the vision of Alinksy is too singular, post-Depression urban politics too specific, the concepts of democracy and citizenship too lofty to have relevance to contemporary street outreach. Or perhaps not. We contend that the present-day violence interventionist shares much the same situation as Alinsky when he entered Back of the Yards in the 1930s. Formally called upon to ameliorate a core community problem of concern to broader society, the work of outreach itself—taking place between various community organizations and actors—eventually showed the way to an intersection of all the problems, revealing the fundamental predicament for neighborhoods affected by legacies of violence. Like the forsaken and stigmatized Back of the Yards nearly 100 years ago, the neighborhoods served by contemporary outreach workers are underappreciated sites of basic democratic struggle, wrestling to construct citizenship where racial exclusion, intense poverty, violence, ineffective policing, and systemic disinvestment have been the rule for decades. Time will tell if the moment that street outreach is currently having will be able to deliver—as Alinsky and his present-day colleagues had hoped—on the possibility of restructuring democratic

and citizen–state relationships through the provision of safety. But as a research community, our analytic frame must be expansive enough to attend to this possibility. By re-centering our theories and research methods on the communities served by street outreach, we have an opportunity to enlarge the field of study, improving the science of CVI as well as its practice.

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