

Put the Guns Down: A Chicago Strategy for Curbing Violence

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Illustration by Daniel X. O'Neil

A strategy aimed at reducing gun violence in Chicago by targeting gang members most at risk of being victims or perpetrators with a combination of “moral suasion” and the threat of criminal sanctions resulted in significant reductions of violence, according to an Urban Institute study.

The study focused on the Chicago Violence Reduction Strategy (VRS), launched in 2009 in Chicago neighborhoods identified as at-risk areas for shootings and gang activity. VRS involves calling in key members of violent street groups to meetings with community leaders and justice authorities, and putting them “on notice” that unless they desist from violent activities they will face criminal sanctions. But they are also given alternative options of counseling and social services if they put down their guns. Community leaders are also brought into the meetings to impress upon gang members that their actions are harming the neighborhood.

The program evaluation, which began in 2011, found that VRS was “associated with a 23 percent reduction in the shooting patterns of treated groups (victimization and offending) and a 32 percent reduction in the shooting victimization of group members.”

But it also found that the strategy’s impacts were limited to the neighborhoods themselves, and that widespread perceptions of mistrust in law enforcement represented a serious barrier to broader success.

“Mutual mistrust threatens VRS because the intervention’s underlying logic is that stronger police -community relationships will reduce shootings,” said the study’s authors. “The mistrust underscores the intervention’s importance in repairing and strengthening justice system–community relationships.”

The evaluation was conducted by Anika Dwivedi, Jocelyn Fontaine, Jesse Jannetta and David Leitson of the Urban Institute and Andrew Papachristos of Yale University. Funding was provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The full study is [available here](http://www.urban.org/research/publication/put-guns-down/view/full_report) (http://www.urban.org/research/publication/put-guns-down/view/full_report).