



Episode 07: Community Violence Interventions with Gillian Caplan

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Intro:

Welcome to the NCJA podcast. This podcast series explores promising practices, provides guidance on strategic planning, and discusses how the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant program or Byrne JAG contributes to improving justice systems across the country. We hope you enjoy it.

Simone Greene:

Welcome to the NCJA podcast. My name is Simone Greene and I am a program manager with NCJA strategic planning and training and technical assistance team. One of the many things we do is produce resources that explore promising practices and trends. We've just released a new fact sheet called An Overview: Community Violence Intervention Strategies. Today, my colleague, fellow program manager and author of the fact sheet, Gillian Caplan, is going to speak with us about CVIs and why they're important. Welcome, Gillian.

Gillian Caplan:

Thanks, Simone. I'm excited to talk to you more about community violence intervention strategies and why they can be so helpful in reducing violence.

Simone Greene:

Great. Community violence intervention strategies for CVIs have been in the news and discussed widely in the criminal justice field lately. Can you tell us a little about the history of these interventions and why they're a hot topic now?

Gillian Caplan:

Of course. So community violence intervention has been in existence for decades with community based organizations successfully reducing violence through locally driven, data informed, alternative public safety measures. But let's start with what we mean when we say community violence. Community violence consists of the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person, group, or community in a specific location that results in injury, death, psychological harm, mal development, or deprivation.

When thinking of the history of community violence, people often refer to homicides as the number one issue, particularly homicides from gun violence, which makes total sense. However, more recently, researchers and policymakers have started to acknowledge that the toll of non fatal injuries is pretty significant because it far outnumbers fatal deaths by more than 100 to one. And non fatal violence has a huge impact on the mental and psychological health of a community.

So in the last few years, we're seeing a larger emphasis on this area of community violence. So that significant pivot has drawn more attention to these strategies, and frankly, they're a hot topic now because they work. We now have a lot of data that shows successful reductions by using CVI strategies. And as violence has begun to rise in the past year with the challenges and uncertainty of the pandemic, the Biden administration is supporting localities to adopt and advance this suite of approaches with a \$5 billion initiative.

Simone Greene:

Wow, that's great. So the fact sheet describes four different models of CVIs. Can you tell us about these?

Gillian Caplan:

Absolutely. There are several models for community violence intervention CVIs, but the fact sheet and for our conversation today, we'll talk about group violence intervention, street outreach, crime prevention through environmental design, or [inaudible 00:03:29], and hospital based violence intervention programs. So we'll start with group violence interventions or GVIs.

GVI is based on the understanding that a small and identifiable group within a community is responsible for the majority of violence, and this strategy in itself is considered a form of problem oriented policing. So the individuals that I was referring to earlier, that small identifiable group, are typically associated with this violence and tend to be affiliated in groups. So the violence stems from local rivalries and competition, things like disrespect or a family beef. It's really important to note that these groups tend to be marked as crews or gangs, but in this work, we don't really use these terms because they infer an organized structure and they include ... Or they exclude, excuse me, informal street groupings that account for the majority of the violence.

So to really embrace this strategy, we have to emphasize that the violence more than likely stems from conditions of economic desperation and is frequently committed by the most chronically underserved individuals, which is why with the pandemic and the raise in violence, this strategy has become critically important. Given this understanding, this model relies heavily on the carrot and stick theory, providing individuals with resources but also ensuring they understand that if they don't put down the guns, there will be consequences through enforcement.

Simone Greene:

So then what exactly is GVI?

Gillian Caplan:

The key feature of GVI is really understanding that community is the primary deterrent of violence. So while law enforcement plays an essential role, GVI is grounded in the participation of community leaders. Essentially, CVI is an organized cohort of respected and credible community members, faith leaders, social service providers, researchers, and law enforcement officials who use a working list of individuals in the community that are most at risk for committing or becoming the victims of violence.

Again, this really refers to those crews or gangs that we were talking about earlier, those small affiliated groups. These individuals receive custom notifications to alert them that they are on that list and if they agree, they attend intimate in person meetings, or what we call call-ins, with the community cohort. These meetings build relationships. It's a communication around stopping the violence and putting the guns down, but they also provide opportunities for the attendees to enroll in wraparound services.

This is the really important part. Like GED, tutoring, transportation assistance, mental health treatment, housing support, and even tattoo removal. So when we talk about the carrot and the stick model, that's really the carrot, but the stick is that they also include law enforcement messaging about swift and sure legal action if those attendees do not stop perpetrating violence.

Simone Greene:

Okay. So group violence intervention is really about law enforcement and community working together. Now what about street outreach or violence interrupters?

Gillian Caplan:

Right, so that is about that collaboration between law enforcement and community. But when we're talking about street outreach, we're talking about programs that are essentially a public health approach to violence intervention. The premise is that violence, specifically homicides and shootings, mimic a disease that spreads rapidly throughout a community. So violence interrupters or VIs, which is a main component of street outreach programs, are street level conflict mediators. VIs are selected based on their credibility within a community and many times our returning citizens who were previously engaged in those high risk behaviors, such as group and gang involvement.

So while the GVI strategy is meant for that law enforcement and community collaboration like we said earlier, violence interrupters are the opposite. This strategy stays completely separate from law enforcement so that they're able to maintain trust and credibility within the community. That credibility is critical because it provides a common ground with which these interrupters can approach the high risk individuals. Their history within the community, their experience with being incarcerated many times, offers invaluable knowledge and understanding of how the community's inner workings operate, including those strained or tense relationships that can ultimately lead to violent conflict.

Simone Greene:

So violence interrupters operate as peacekeepers?

Gillian Caplan:

Exactly. Given their unique understanding of the communities in which they lived and are now working, the majority of their time is spent in the streets to build trust, network, and connect with those high risk individuals we referred to earlier, to better understand where violent conflict might arise. This means that their main goal is to prevent retaliatory violence and to ensure unresolved conflict does not escalate to a fatal level.

Simone Greene:

Both of these intervention strategies seem to be driven by community leaders and embedded within the neighborhoods where violence is prevalent. Are there strategies that are not located within the physical community?

Gillian Caplan:

So one of the big ones is hospital based violence intervention programs. So hospitals have become the first line of support for victims of violence for two really critical reasons. One, they have immediate access to victims of violence, and two, working with victims while they're still in the hospital provides

time for the tensions that the conflict and the violence might have accrued that might lead to retaliatory violence between the victim and the perpetrator to settle.

Hospital based violence intervention programs consist of partnering medical staff and credible community based partners to support victims of violent crime through safety planning, services, and trauma informed care. That's probably the most important part. This is a critical time to reach victims is when they're in the hospital, because research tells us that victims of violence are not only at a higher risk for being revictimized but they're also at a major risk of becoming perpetrators of that violence.

However, it also tells us that the time that the victims in a healthcare setting spend recovering is a really great opportunity to tackle potential retaliation that could lead to recidivism for not only the victim, but the original perpetrator. So it really is working on keeping as many people out of the system as possible. In this strategy it's important to recognize that victimization is not typically an isolated incident, so providers use the hospital setting to offer resources that then follow the individual back into the community.

Outreach workers present these resources to victims while they're in the hospital and then the outreach workers also support the victims once they are reentering the community. A couple examples of these resources are community based services, mentoring, home visits, follow up assistance, and long term case management. But we also focus on protective factors when we're thinking about this strategy, so those can include things like social support, job readiness, and educational attainment, and these help to reduce the risk factors like substance misuse and chronic employment that many times lead to retaliatory violence or recidivism.

Simone Greene:

So it sounds like a lot of these programs can be implemented simultaneously. Is there any CVI strategy that focuses more on the physical components of a community instead of the personal relationships?

Gillian Caplan:

They can definitely exist simultaneously. In fact, many times they are better when they're implemented together. As far as the strategy that has to do more with the physical environment, we're talking about community driven crime prevention through environmental design or what we refer to more shortly as CPTED. So CPTED is a long term multidisciplinary strategy using urban planning, architectural design, and the management of built and natural environments to reduce gun violence.

Research indicates that a community's physical environment bettered by simply cleaning up trash is a critical component of creating safety within a community and should be as an investment by the city. So while clean green space, and like I mentioned before, things like trash cleanup is often identified as the main factor in CPTED, the strategy consists of four main key components.

So the first one is access control, designing streets, sidewalks, building entrances, and neighborhood gateways to clearly indicate transitions from the public environment to semi private and private areas. Number two is going to be surveillance, maximizing the visibility of people, parking areas, vehicles, inside activities. So examples of this may include strategic placement of windows, doors, walkways, parking lots and vehicular routes.

A third major component of this strategy is territorial reinforcement. So we want to make sure that we're using sidewalks, landscaping, and porches to help distinguish between public and private areas. Showing signs of things like ownership that send that hands off message to those who may commit a crime.

The final and equally as important component of this strategy is maintenance. This is where trash cleanup comes in, addressing management and maintenance of space, such as a proper upkeep. That could be like mowing the grass, trimming trees and landscaping, picking up trash, repairing broken windows and light fixtures, and painting over graffiti. This signals that our location or facility is well cared for and therefore, would be inhospitable to criminal activity, and that an owner or a manager or a neighbor is watching out for the property and could spot illegal behavior.

The cool thing about CPTED is it can require a little cost and little time once the physical location has been cleaned up. It also doesn't rely on relationships and behavior change that those other strategies do, which leaves less opportunity for error.

Simone Greene:

Thanks for that. So a lot of our listeners are recipients of Byrne JAG assistance grants, or manage those funds. Are CVIs something Byrne JAG dollars can be used to support?

Gillian Caplan:

Absolutely. The Bureau of Justice Assistance has now added community violence intervention as an area of emphasis for Byrne JAG programming, so that's a critical, critical change. This is an opportune time for state administering agencies to explore these strategies, as well as use the funding to support evaluation research on existing CVI programs they might already have.

Simone Greene:

Thanks so much, Gillian, for talking to us about CVIs. So where can listeners find in NCJA's new CVI fact sheet?

Gillian Caplan:

They can find that fact sheet on our website and we will also be posting a link to it on all of our social media pages, so Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. They can always reach out to us with questions at strategicplanning@NCJ.org, but also don't forget to check back for future podcasts where we'll dive deeper into different strategies with practitioners doing this amazing work in the field.

Simone Greene:

Wonderful. Thanks again.

Gillian Caplan:

Thanks, Simone.