



Episode 19: New York's Project Rise with Joseph Popcun by The NCJA Podcast

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Announcer: 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.

Gillian Caplan: Hello, everyone. My name is Gillian Caplan and I'm a Program Manager at the National Criminal Justice Association. On today's episode of the NCJA Podcast, I'm joined by Joe Popcun, the Executive Deputy Commissioner at the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services to discuss New York State's new violence reduction initiative, Project RISE. Thank you so much for joining us today, Joe. I would love if you could start by telling us a little bit more about your background and then we'll dive right into the questions.

Joseph Popcun: Thanks so much, Gillian. I really appreciate you having me on the NCJA podcast, I'm excited. I'm the Executive Deputy Commissioner at DCJS and here in New York State. My background, I've been in this role a year. Before that, I was Assistant Secretary for Public Safety, overseeing the state's criminal justice, law enforcement and homeland security agencies here in New York for several years, and also worked on the Governor's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Task Force. I got my start in DC working at Federal Homeland Security doing immigration work, but I'm really excited to join you today.

Gillian Caplan: Great. Well, we're really excited to have you. Before we dive into the specifics of the program we're here to talk about today, can you walk us through New York's violence reduction programming history and how it seems to be changing, as well as the four pillars your state incorporates when combating violence?

Joseph Popcun: Of course. New York, largely through DCJS, or Division of Criminal Justice Services, has implemented, I think, a very comprehensive violence prevention and reduction strategy. Really, it's around two focuses. One, keeping New Yorkers safe, but secondly, building stronger and safer communities by providing support to our law enforcement and community-based partners. The key for us has been an intentional balance of resources, training and technical assistance for law enforcement agencies and their community-based organization partners to reduce violence in the short term and prevent it in the long term by addressing its root causes.

A little bit of context. Before the pandemic in 2018, 2019, New York had reached all-time lows in shootings, murders, violent crime by firearms, both in New York City, but also throughout the rest of the state. New York was the safest large state in the country and at the same time the least incarcerative, and that proved, to me at least, that we can adopt and implement smart on crime policies, practices and programs. Of those, of the policies, practices and programs, what DCJS does best is the programs that are rooted both in the needs of the local communities and that are driven by data and evidence.

Where we found ourselves during the pandemic, like other places, was that gun violence surged. While we were still the safest large state in the country in 2020 in terms of overall crime, the increase in violence needed to be addressed. Thankfully, we worked with our governor, Kathy Hochul, to recognize the urgent need and she made the largest public safety investment in a generation, nearly a quarter of a billion dollars in her budget, which was enacted in April of this year. That budget provided DCJS with more than a hundred million primarily to address gun violence.

This significant investment enabled us to double-down and provide the law enforcement agencies and community programs with strategies to better address the persistent problems of crime and specifically violent crime. At a very high level, those strategies that I'll talk about are GIVE, Gun Involved Violence Elimination program, our Crime Analysis Center network, also known as CACs and Snug Street Outreach.

GIVE, which dates back to 2014, incentivizes evidence-based strategies to reduce shootings and save lives within law enforcement. What we do is provide \$18.2 million to support 17 counties, which includes 20 police departments, district attorneys, probation departments, sheriff's office, and those are the areas outside of New York City that have 90% of the violent crime by firearm. We go into those communities and we talk to the law enforcement partners and we have them select from an evidence-based menu of strategies that they want to implement to drive down violence. There's problem-oriented policing, procedural justice, hotspots policing, SEPTED, crime prevention through environmental design, focused deterrents and street outreach.

That's been a pillar program of ours that's evolved over time, and as new evidence-based strategies become available, we incorporate them and then bring in technical assistance from nationally recognized researchers to help our local law enforcement implement those programs. We've seen tremendous success in places like Buffalo that have done aggressive micro hotspot analysis and then changed their patrols to be able to address those hotspots proactively.



This year, we increased the funding by about \$4 million and we focused in a few key areas. One is to improve the clearance rates of non-fatal shootings, another was to do additional youth outreach, and the third one was to try to do an alternative community supervision pilot to address re-offenses by young people and improve their connections with employment and other services. That's GIVE, which has been the backbone of our direct support for law enforcement.

Behind the scenes for law enforcement, we've set up over the last decade a Crime Analysis Center network, which has 10 centers across the state and they serve more than 350 state and local law enforcement agencies in more than 40 of our counties, and this has really become the backbone of our investigative efforts to deter, investigate, and solve crimes. These CACs have civilian analysts as well as sworn law enforcement from the partner organizations doing investigative support, information development and crime analysis products to help law enforcement more effectively solve, reduce, and prevent crime. The growth of the network has been exponential. Just in the past few years, these CAC networks have handled over 60,000 requests for information assistance research.

The difficult part was that the network was really funded from changing the couch cushions. We were using some federal sources, we were using some state sources. This year, for the first time, we have a dedicated appropriation of \$15 million, which is increasing staffing at the centers and increasing our crime gun tracing capabilities to address firearm involved violence. GIVE and the CAC network is on the law enforcement side, and on the community-based side, we've created Snug Street Outreach.

Snug is a New York state adaptation of the Cure Violence model, and it treats violence as a public health crisis. Our goal is to identify the source of disputes and violence, interrupt their transmission within the community and treat and assist those affected by violence, and specifically, gun violence. We currently are in 14 communities. We have street outreach workers who are employed by community-based organizations, many of whom have lived experience and service credible messengers to respond to shootings, engage the community, and provide wraparound mentorship and social services to high-risk youth who are at risk of gun violence.

We paired that a few years ago using some VOCA dollars to embed social workers and case managers, not only to provide mental health and social work support to the clients, the young people who are at risk in the community, but also to the outreach workers themselves, who have been traumatized by going

to scenes where there were shootings and addressing the complex trauma that goes with working within these communities.

This year's funding increased. It used to be \$3 or \$4 million, we're now at \$21 million. When you look kind of at what happened over the last few years, we did emergency increases during the pandemic that we've now codified into the state budget. We increased the number of sites. We were at 12, now we're at 14, we'll be moving to 15, hopefully within the next few months. We started to embed some of these community violence specialists at hospitals and we're doing much more to be able to recruit and retain the outreach workers, incredible messengers, because they're critical to our success in the community. The fourth strategy and the last to round out the community side is Project RISE, which is the focus of today's podcast.

Gillian Caplan:

Great. Now that we've discussed the other community violence intervention strategies, those including law enforcement and those more focused on the community, can you briefly describe Project RISE, where the idea came from and how the idea came to fruition?

Joseph Popcun:

Yeah, of course. Project RISE is our new, to round out our strategies, it's a \$28 million statewide community violence prevention and empowerment program. Its goal is to really reach the people in places that have been most impacted by the increase in pandemic era of violence. What we're doing is we're investing \$4 million in each of seven cities that we've identified. The cities were selected by our agency using a data-driven approach. We looked at demographics, poverty data, we looked at violent crime and shooting data, all of which had been reported to us from the city's respective law enforcement agencies. Within those seven cities, we are trying to create a model that brings together community stakeholders to respond to gun violence, invest in solutions, sustain positive programming and empower communities. That's where the RISE comes from, Respond, Invest, Sustain and Empower.

We started thinking about this potential project about a year ago when we were looking at how to bring in new resources and partners into our community violence prevention network, because a lot of people were saying, "Okay, what's the future of the Snug program and how do we become more engaged beyond just the violence interruption space, but to do more preventative work and respond to the needs of the community which had grown?" Thankfully, here in New York, we had an economic development model called the REDCs or the Regional Economic Development Councils, which gave us this inspiration. These councils were set up probably five or six years ago, and they're made up of different regional stakeholders from the business community, commerce,

higher education, local government agencies. They convene and they deliberate on different programs and proposals that they think are going to foster economic development. Then, they submit a regional proposal that supports projects and needs they themselves have identified.

For Project RISE, we wanted to take some of that participatory bottom up model and bring together all those who had been impacted by the issue of violence. The residents themselves, local government agencies, community-based organizations like our Snug Partners, schools, higher education institutions and law enforcement agencies. While our other forms of report are what you would consider more top-down, Project RISE is meant to be grassroots or bottom-up strategy that listens, learns and lifts up the community as probably directing resources where they need them.

Gillian Caplan: What are the main program goals and different components of Project RISE?

Joseph Popcun: In each community, what we're doing now is we've provided \$2 million to do programming, direct programming, personal services, non-personal services, and \$2 million in capital funding. What we want is, we've created this kind of funding application for them to identify programs, partnerships and strategies that work to improve safety and expand youth and family opportunities within neighborhoods. Those are the kind of two buckets, improve safety and expand youth and family opportunities.

Our ultimate goal, when the program say it goes five years, we're looking to build the local community's capacity to implement and sustain programming to address the underlying factors contributing to violence in the community. I'll just say it again because it's a lot to unpack. Build a local community's capacity to implement, so to begin, and sustain the programming that addresses the underlying factors contributing to violence in the community. At the same time, we want to enhance those responses to violence within the community through increased community partnerships and programming with a healing and equity lens. The healing and equity lens, I think, is important as we go forward, and so I hope we can expand on that a little bit more.

What we're working on right now within those goals are, we've helped form steering committees to identify those local needs and to help them submit a consolidated funding application to us. The committees reflect a diversity of our community partners, schools, education, local government agencies and public safety partners, and we're now helping them fill out and submit this, I would call "whole of neighborhood" application to support these new programs between government and community organizations. We want to help repair, rebuild in

the aftermath of these violence. The community engagement process has had a helpful byproduct as well, which is it's allowed us to better align different sources of state support to address some of the gaps that we found in employment, education, health and mental healthcare and housing as well.

Gillian Caplan: A little earlier you mentioned a grassroots approach and then we talked about enhancing community capacity, so it sounds like Project RISE's main program goals really consider equity in this program. Was this intentional? How does equity play into all violence reduction efforts in New York?

Joseph Popcun: That's a great question. I think it was definitely intentional. The focus on healing and equity were really informed by our work today on Youth Justice. We have an Office of Youth Justice, which works to provide resources and expertise to promote positive change and improve the quality and responsiveness of the justice system on behalf of youth and families. When we looked at their work and what they've been doing, we really found that they would've been core for them in terms of restorative justice practices and trust building within communities was to lead in this space with equity and healing at its center.

I think it's manifested in Project RISE in two ways. First is the development of the project's community engagement. We were very purposeful in not wanting this to be a competitive process, but rather a collaborative one. In June of this year, we hosted community listening sessions and stakeholder workshops in those seven cities to learn directly from the residents and representatives from the partners we talked about, community-based groups, local government schools, about what's going on right now, what are the current programs, where are their gaps, where are their barriers to access, and what are the challenges they were facing as they looked to address violence. It wasn't an ordinary listen session because, obviously, we've been to these communities many times over the year, we wanted to be a little bit different.

On the workshop side, it's where we put pen to paper on what they needed to respond to violence. We had facilitators that we had identified from those communities who helped bring together those stakeholders and convene them. We had our staff, our Youth Justice staff, doing real-time notes and reflections on feedback. We had the mental map projector, where we were taking notes and comparing themes in real-time. Then, we had an academic partner, our Youth Justice Institute, to assess the process and will hopefully help us refine our future efforts.

When we ask the questions of the community groups who are there, we said, "How has violence impacted your community?", and talked a lot about the role

of trauma, but also about what are the things, what have been the silver linings, what are the things that are groups are going above and beyond with very little funding? We asked, "What does a healing and thriving community look like?" I think this question is really important because, a lot of times when we talk about responses to trauma, we're talking about what's wrong with an individual, with a family, with a community, instead of what's right with the family, the individual and the community. What's going on that's beneficial? What's the foundation that we can build off of?

That healing-centered engagement framework was really important to bringing the community together to say, "Oh, actually here are places where good work is being done." We also talked about who's in the space in terms of organizations and agencies, where are their resources that they're drawing down, whether they're using their own resources, they're fundraising for them, they're using local resources, federal state. Then, just jumping back to the capital funding, we also asked them, what infrastructure or equipment would they want to improve or create to prevent or reduce the impact of violence? We had talked a lot about the role of community centers over time and how access and barriers to those had become problematic. That was really, in my mind, an equitable way of going about it to set a broad table and make the space for everyone to come together and tell us what they needed and what they learned, and for us as the state agency, just to listen.

The second key equity component to me is that the communities want and need a diversity of organizations to deliver services and programs to their neighbors and to their neighborhoods. That included organizations that have typically been unable to directly receive public funding because they have administrative or organizational capacity issues. To address this disparity, we're actually requiring organizations that are receiving this funding to sub-award or pass through a minimum of 25% to smaller community-based organizations to help them build the capacity to manage public funding going forward. We know that that is going to be very, very helpful later on when we talk about wanting to line up with our core goals about having sufficient diverse programs within the communities. Our ultimate goal is to build a constellation of diverse organizations who can sustainably provide the services that respond to each community's need for the years to come.

Gillian Caplan:

It sounds like you all really rooted intentionality at the center of this work. You've already talked a little bit about this, but when developing this program and trying to encourage buy-in, what stakeholders have been necessary to engage?



Joseph Popcun:

It's a great question, and I think when we set out to do it, we wanted everybody who had been impacted, residents, local government agencies, community-based organizations, schools, law enforcement agencies. But as we got into each city, into each space, there were oftentimes unlikely partners who wanted to come into the room. We had some healthcare providers, some hospitals who were really leaning into violence as a public health crisis that wanted to be in the spaces. We had, I think, more government organizations. We had probation departments and social service agencies and family services agencies coming to see what this was going to be all about and how they could, even if violence and public safety weren't at the core of their mission, they knew that it was a result of the underlying conditions of the neighborhood that had manifested.

We cast a broad net about getting people in this space, and we were fortunate that giving our existing support for law enforcement through GIVE and the Crime Analysis Centers, and our footprint with the community-based organizations through Snug, we were able to bring 20 to 50 people in each city to help build support and provide that feedback that we talked about.

I think it's critically important that you have all types and levels of organizations, county partners, city partners, schools and community groups. One of the things that I think we were able to take back right away was that there was a lot of shared themes from across the cities, need for expanded mentorship, mental health services, restorative practices, community trust building, employment and education and youth development activities. Those were the short-term things, and then, when we started to zoom out in these discussions, we talked a lot about the role of trauma, intergenerational trauma, that resulted from long-term exposure to violence and the need to help these communities build resiliency and strengthen their youth, families and neighborhoods.

Gillian Caplan:

Thank you for that. What are some of the obstacles and challenges you anticipate encountering while standing up this program?

Joseph Popcun:

Where we are now, we had proposed it as a part of and was included in the governor's state of the state last January. Then, the resources were provided in the budget, which was enacted in April. Then June, we went out and we went to all seven cities. Then, as we left those cities, we started to do ongoing technical assistance with the steering committees, who wants to be involved. Then, about two months ago, we announced the funding application and provided it to them. It wasn't an RFP, it was more of a work plan that reflected all of the topics that we had talked about in June when we had met them, but also the ongoing technical assistance. We've assigned members of our Office of Youth Justice to work with each city, so that they have a designated point of contact that they

can go to to ask questions and make sure that their programs and services are hitting the right mark.

I think, with any new program, there's always going to be internal and external expectations to manage, and so within our agency, we had to bring a lot of program areas into the fold. We had our Office of Justice, Probation and Correctional Alternatives, Program Development and Funding, Finance, our Justice Research and Performance and Public Information Office, just to name a few. When we got around the table, we kept on revising the project's vision and implementation map, and we had to get that right, which was really the work of April and May before we went out to the community, before we felt comfortable going out and saying, "Here is where we're going to put our best foot forward," but also recognizing that we needed to be able to adapt and pivot, we heard that a different approach was needed on the ground.

I think that bringing everybody together and also still having some ability to be adaptive was not always the easiest way. It took a lot of time and labor upfront to build a consensus, so that we had a solid foundation. It's just not the way that government agencies typically do business, and there were several times where I think I could at least feel the pushback of, "Well, it'll be so much easier if we just did an RFP or an RFA," a request for proposal or a request for application, because that's the typical norm in government, is just to, "Okay, I'm going to put what the community needs into this document. I'm going to send it out and I'll see what the applications I get back," and that's the cycle. This was a much more time and effort upfront that we hope is going to yield benefits in the years to come.

Then, externally, we knew that these communities have all been historically marginalized and underserved, and so they were likely to be deeply skeptical about a new government program. To overcome that, I think two things that helped. One is that we went to the communities and said, "We've already secured the funding. If this isn't a tell us what you need, we'll go back to our capital, Albany, and then talk to the governor, talk to the legislator, and hopefully get it in the budget." We knew we had it in the budget, and so I think it gave us some credibility up front of, "Okay, they really are here to invest in us."

Secondly, our agency was known for the Snug Program and our other programs, which lent us some credibility. We spent the first day in each of the cities really meeting with our funded programs, so that we could share feedback on what was working for them, what they needed, and then the second day was focused really on the Project RISE convening and workshop. I think that sequence was



very helpful. It helped that we were known to the community, that we included a facilitator from their neighborhoods, and that we were upfront with our acknowledgement that we were here to listen, learn, and lift up.

Gillian Caplan: Given that this is early days of this program, how does your agency plan to ensure the sustainability and long-lasting success of Project RISE?

Joseph Popcun: That's a great question. I think there's a few different ways of looking at it. First in my mind is, hopefully this is a five-year program. We will continue to advance and advocate for continued state support during our annual budget. With this investment, we are going to keep reconvening the community and we'll go back out to the seven cities likely after the budget this year, and then ask them to revise their funding needs and priorities, so we can continue to be adaptive and direct the resources where they're needed most. It's going to be an iterative process.

Second, as I mentioned, when we went out to the community, we partnered with an academic, our Youth Justice Institute at the University of Albany, which is part of our SUNY system. We're doing an evaluation of not only this very participatory process, but also the programs and services that are supported and the impact they've had. As part of our technical assistance, we're going to be reviewing the programs that are going to get off the ground, and we're going to rely upon some of our other evidence-based work to help build data and evidence to be able to later assess.

Now, we're using things like, if they're asking for a specific type of programming that we're familiar with, we'll build in a logic model, so that it'll be easier for us later on to think about what are the process and outcome metrics that we want to use to be successful, which is, again, a multi-year project. Our goal is really that this is going to help us tell the story of the program model and also where it worked best. Our hope is that it's going to be shareable with other agencies, particularly those agencies outside the criminal justice space, because I think one of the key takeaways from the community conversations were, "Oh, we wish they would do this for housing funds, for instance, or healthcare funds." I think it is going to be interesting to see if this model works well for other types of funding.

Third, and really to tie it back to the capacity building, we want these funds to be used to help support smaller non-profit organizations to be able to grow and receive state and federal support for their efforts by structuring that minimum pass through amount or sub-award amount for each award, which is 25%. Our goal is that we're helping to foster that capacity building, and we're committed



to providing that ongoing technical assistance to any and all size and type organizations wherever they are.

Gillian Caplan: Great. Thank you. We've already done a pretty deep dive into Project RISE, and you've talked a lot about GIVE and CACs and Snug, but what other violence reduction strategies is New York State implementing and how does Project RISE fit into the larger scope of violence reduction work through the state?

Joseph Popcun: That's great. I think everything I've talked about so far has really been within our Division of Criminal Justice Services, so DCJS. Zooming out to the other state agencies as a part of the state administration, we've recently created within our State Department of Health, the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, and their role along with ours is to coordinate inter-agency gun violence reduction efforts, analyze data from a variety of sources and support public awareness work.

We're actively involved in their work and vice versa, so that we can approach gun violence as a public health crisis, which to me means that we're emphasizing that preventative measures and addressing the social determinants of community well-being. The partnership is really exciting because I think it lends itself well to bringing other state agencies, particularly those state agencies that might not always feel like violence reduction is at their core, like the Department of Labor or Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance together, because they all have programs that, at the periphery, really help improve community well-being in ways that are preventative toward the conditions of violence.

More indirectly about Department of Health, this partnership with the office being there, brings healthcare providers and hospitals into our larger solutions around gun violence. We've already seen a lot of hospitals and hospital networks reach out to say, "Okay, what should I be doing better? What models should I be implementing, so that we can help drive down firearm-related injuries and deaths?" That's one.

The second one, the governor recognized very early on that the overwhelming majority of firearms used in crimes in New York originate outside of the state. That's roughly 75% to 80% of guns used in crimes come from outside New York. To stem the tide, the governor, in January, formed the Inter-state Task Force on Illegal Guns, which increased cooperation and collaboration among local, state, and federal law enforcement partners to really disrupt and dismantle the pipeline of illegally trafficked firearms and get illegal guns off our streets. To date, this effort has resulted in more than 8,000 illegal guns being seized by our state police and partnering agencies. It reflects a broad commitment and



regional one across 10 states, New York, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont. DCJS is helping to support this effort by installing and building out dedicated crime gun and ballistics tracing equipment in our Crime Analysis Centers to allow local law enforcement agencies to process evidence faster and solve and prevent firearm involved violent crime.

Gillian Caplan: To end our conversation today, for states who may be in the beginning stages of learning more and implementing more community-based crime reduction strategies like Project RISE, what takeaways would you share with them?

Joseph Popcun: I said it a bit earlier, but I think my motto for 2022 has become, Listen, Learn, and Lift up. It's not just because I like alliteration, but I think that really is at the core, not only of building equity and healing, but also of trying to think differently about the way that government operates in this space. For anyone who knows me, or as you've seen from this podcast, I talk a great deal, but this has been a time to reflect on what the agency, what our communities, and what the state needs to return to our historic lows of violence, which were only a few years ago in 2018 and 2019. I would say, take a moment and bring your teams together to reflect on your current programs and ask the question, what's missing? What's missing from the constellation or the arrangement of organizations you have and programs that you have?

There's no one-size-fits-all solution to violence as we know, but we know more about what works than we ever have. Don't be afraid to bring a critical eye to what's working and be candid about what's not, so that you can bring your team together and lead them in a new direction. I would also lean into the feedback provided by your funded programs about what they're hearing, seeing and doing within the neighborhoods. It oftentimes isn't only we want more resources, but also they're talking about where they want to grow and how they best want to serve others. We've been able to, like I said earlier, really bring alignment where we've heard from our programs, "Oh, okay. Well, this community center used to be open, but there was some dispute between the county government and the city government." We as the state had been able to convene conversations between those entities and elected officials and make real progress, so that the community knows that there's not an artificial barrier to access to the community programs that are out there.

That's been really helpful to us to have an ongoing feedback mechanism. Not only about what's in the contract or what's in the grant, but also about what they're seeing in their communities, because they're best-positioned. Then finally, don't be afraid to bring communities together. It's not always the



traditional role of state agencies to be visible and on the ground. A lot of times we got the question of, "Wow, you guys came all the way out here from Albany to be with us," but it meant a lot to them, and it also helps in ways that I think are more important now than ever. The criminal justice profession at large is being asked to do more now than ever, but we also know that public safety is a shared responsibility. I believe that we're going to best-position ourselves for success when we step inside the community, which is often outside the comfort zone, and then find new ways to build relationships that make our neighborhoods stronger and safer.

Gillian Caplan:

Listen, Learn and Lift Up. I think those are great words to end our conversation with here today. Again, thank you so much for joining us today, Joe, and giving us a little bit more insight into New York's really comprehensive and innovative work to reduce violence.

Joseph Popcun:

Thank you so much.