



Bridging Anti-Violence Movements

Exploring the Connection Between Community Violence Intervention and Anti-Domestic Violence Work

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Intimate Partner Violence and Community Violence are Strongly Connected

Intimate partner violence remains pervasive in the United States. In the last half-century society's understanding and treatment of intimate partner violence evolved beyond viewing it as a "private family matter." Structures and interventions, such as wraparound survivor support services, civil and criminal justice system responses, a public health framework for prevention, and a growing body of research devoted to understanding the prevalence and impact of victimization, now exist to promote survivor safety and offender accountability. Missing from this progress, however, is the widespread view of intimate partner violence as an issue of community safety. It is true that intimate partner violence is distinct from other forms of violence, particularly in the underlying belief system, steeped in misogyny, that one partner is entitled to use violence to control every aspect of the other partner's humanity. Yet there is a developing body of research which demonstrates that intimate partner violence and community violence broadly overlap, particularly with respect to the use of firearms.

Access to a firearm is a leading lethality risk factor in intimate partner violence. A seminal study found that women are five times more likely to be killed by their abusive male partner when he has access to a firearm.¹ Firearms are used to commit more than half of all intimate partner homicides in the United States— averaging approximately 76 women per month in recent years.² Additionally, millions more survivors report having been nonfatally shot, shot at, or threatened with a firearm by an intimate partner.³

Frequently, as a means to continue their coercion, intimidation, and control over their intimate partner, abusers expand their actual and threatened physical violence beyond just their intimate partner. In a 2024 national survey of more than 2,700 gender-based violence survivors, respondents reported in substantial numbers that their abusers had made threats to use firearms against their children, other family members and friends, colleagues, pets, and others.⁴ Homicide data demonstrates that these threats are often carried out. The overwhelming majority of children under age 13 killed by a firearm are killed in their home and nearly a third of these deaths are related to intimate partner violence.⁵ One study of men who murdered their intimate partners found that they were nearly twice as likely to have at least one additional victim when they used a firearm as compared with other means of homicide.⁶

In the 2024 survey described above, more than 1 in 10 survivor-respondents reported their abuser had made explicit threats to commit a community shooting in order to further their power and control. While mass shootings are rare in the scope of gun violence in the U.S., more than half of the mass shootings between.⁷ More and more, communities are realizing that those who perpetrate domestic violence in their community are often the same people committing other gun violence in the community. For example, prosecutors in Birmingham, AL undertook a cumbersome effort to gather and analyze data about misdemeanor offenders of domestic violence—low level offenses generally handled in municipal courts that are not typically the jurisdiction of the state prosecutors. Across the country, the majority of criminal domestic violence cases are charged as, or result in, misdemeanors. In Birmingham they learned that, consistently across several years, 70% of the people committing shootings in the community were also committing domestic violence at home.⁸

Additionally, the same adverse social determinants of health are significantly associated with gun violence in the community and in the intimate partner violence contexts, including economic instability, food insecurity, housing instability, lack of educational and employment opportunities, lack of healthcare access, and structural racism and sexism.⁹ All of this supports the notion that investment in developing a coordinated approach that addresses these forms of violence as interwoven is worthwhile.

Parallel Anti-Violence Approaches

Despite the increasingly clear reality that domestic violence and community gun violence are—in large proportion—overlapping, the work to reduce and address domestic violence and the work to reduce and address community gun violence have mostly operated in silos. Historically, the anti-domestic violence movement focused on the civil and criminal justice systems for abuser accountability and intervention efforts have focused on reaching survivors and connecting them with wraparound services to meet their multidimensional needs. To address the risk of intimate partner gun violence, the anti-domestic violence movement historically relied on the civil and criminal legal system to disarm domestic violence perpetrators through the issuance and enforcement of court orders requiring surrender of known firearms and prevention of future acquisition of firearms. While successful to some degree, formal legal system responses struggle to consistently and effectively ensure compliance with these orders and to address unregistered and illegally possessed firearms which constitute most firearms in many areas of the country, including large urban areas. The success of this justice-system based approach has been measured by its association with intimate partner homicide reduction in the community. But where a protective effect of these policies has been observed, it has not benefited marginalized communities.¹⁰ Additionally, while court orders prohibiting possession of firearms might have some deterrent effect, there is little evidence to suggest that such orders positively impact social perceptions of firearm possession and use. Formal legal interventions seem to have little to no impact on social attitudes or norms regarding firearms.

The communities of color which have been disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence and least protected by existing legal interventions have been identifying these insufficiencies for decades. In recent years, the mainstream anti-domestic violence field has evolved to embrace this desire for alternative options for intervention and accountability generally and begun to direct attention and resources into models like trauma-informed restorative justice that has been built by women of color. This is true in the context of domestic violence and firearms as well. The field is exploring strategies for dispossessing domestic abusers of firearms that are effective in the context of unregistered and illegal

firearms and that have a more powerful impact on social perceptions of firearm possession and use. Additionally, abusive partner intervention programs (APIP) have been central to the anti-domestic violence field's efforts to promote accountability and replace abusive behavior with more prosocial behaviors. While models vary, they are predominately carried out in facilitated groups, operating in many ways as peer-to-peer education and norm modeling. For these reasons, the Community Violence Intervention framework, particularly the work of Violence Interrupters, has caught the attention of the anti-domestic violence field.

The similarly framed Community Violence Intervention (CVI) framework uses a community-based, non-justice system approach targeting those in the community most at/in risk of causing and/or experiencing firearm violence and addressing the root causes of violence in a manner responsive to specific needs and context of the community the program serves. CVI models include group violence interventions (involving a collaboration between law enforcement, community leaders, and social service providers in the community), Violence Interrupters or Neighborhood Change Agents (led by individuals who have credibility in the community among those at/in risk of causing or experiencing gun violence), and hospital-based interventions (led by social service providers and case managers to reach those in the hospital setting).¹¹ The CVI framework to reduce gun violence has expanded in the last few years, thanks in part to significant investments during the Biden Administration. CVI programs and their staff rely on community knowledge of firearm possessors, which is often much more comprehensive than formal registries. Additionally, the staff and volunteers who preventatively intervene are often trusted members of the community, and their interventions do more to reshape social norms and messaging around firearm possession and use. Indeed, a baseline of the CVI model involves relationship building with affected community members. The CVI framework is associated with significant reductions in firearm homicides in many of the most gun violence-affected cities in the U.S. in which it has been implemented.¹²

Bridging Anti-Violence Movements

As noted above, there is significant overlap between people who are committing violence in their home and those who are committing it in their community. Importantly, there are also notable similarities between the anti-domestic violence field and the CVI field. For example, in many CVI programs, those carrying out the work in community are former harm doers and/or have been justice-system involved. In many domestic violence programs, those working with and on behalf of survivors are survivors of gender-based violence themselves. At the core of both fields' responses to violence is an understanding of the importance of community and lived experience.

While the early work of the anti-domestic violence field and the Community Violence Intervention field have largely been siloed from each other, we are aware of some attempts to bridge these two models. Recognizing the community trust in those working on behalf of CVI programs, domestic violence programs have seen promise in CVI workers being able to identify victims and survivors of intimate partner violence in the community and offering them information about available intervention and support services. This has taken the form of offering training and education to CVI workers about the nature and dynamics of intimate partner violence and how to identify someone in the community who may benefit from information about available domestic violence services. While conceptually promising, anecdotally, this has had minimal success to date.

Over the past four years, with support from BWJP, the D.C. Coalition Against Domestic Violence (DCCADV) developed and piloted a training curriculum on domestic violence designed for CVIs. Initially, DCCADV held listening sessions with CVI staff and volunteers, and then conducted six pilot trainings using the

resulting curriculum, based on information gathered through the listening sessions, to various groups and in various formats (e.g. half-day and three-day versions). The coalition revised the curriculum and subsequent pilots based on participant evaluations and feedback. The trainings were well-received by many CVI participants, but some remained unconvinced that the content was relevant to their work. DCCADV training staff understood that they were perceived as “outsiders” by many of the participants. However, those participants who did engage in the training expressed a heightened awareness of their ability to interrupt domestic violence as Violence Interrupters in their communities.

Moving Forward in Partnership

We are aware that D.C. is not the only community to engage in similar efforts to bridge the anti-domestic violence and CVI movements in this way and other communities have voiced similar experiences. What appears to present an obstacle is an inherent distrust between the two movements. Resource scarcity may exacerbate this distrust but it is premised upon perceptions which include that the anti-domestic violence field has been pro-criminalization and racist and that the CVI movement has been complicit in allowing misogyny and toxic masculinity to persist. Lack of common language and a common framework, as well as the lack of opportunity to fully develop relationships with one another, may help explain this distrust.

These initial efforts highlight the need to examine the two frameworks with more precision, identifying the commonalities between them and building relationships from that common ground; then confronting the ways in which they are different and the mutual learning that can be facilitated. These efforts also highlight the promise a collective effort by these movements can have in making our families and communities safer. We believe there is promise in identifying the proven successful aspects of each of these two anti-violence fields and piloting a program that integrates those aspects together—building from a foundational understanding of the traumas in both movements, the nature and dynamics of intimate partner violence and that intimate partner gun violence is community gun violence.

Beginning Discussions and Building Partnerships

Building relationships in the community to bridge efforts to reduce intimate partner and community gun violence can begin with asking and answering these questions:

- Who in the community is most impacted by intimate partner and gun violence?
- Where are victims and survivors of intimate partner and gun violence accessing services and support in the community?
- Who is most trusted in the community? Are they involved in anti-domestic violence and/or CVI efforts?
- What domestic violence and community violence programs operate in the community? In particular, what culturally-specific service providers operate in the community?
- How is the existing work peer led?
- How are those existing frameworks informed by community gun violence and intimate partner violence survivors?
- Do existing domestic violence and community gun violence programs in the community have any common partners or supporters?

Existing domestic violence and community gun violence programs in the community can engage in transparent conversations about:

- Whether existing domestic violence and community gun violence programs have hesitations, concerns, or a lack of trust in the other and the basis for those hesitations, concerns, or trust barriers.
- Identifying common values and mission.
- Whether/how existing domestic violence and community gun violence programs address structural and systemic racism and sexism.
- Identifying opportunities to share knowledge and lived expertise.
- Identifying opportunities to more deeply engage the community together, building each other's credibility and trustworthiness.
- The spectrum of successes reached and obstacles faced.
- Identifying the ways in which the programs want the other to show up for them and those they serve.

From these conversations, communities can begin to foster trust and understanding among those that serve victim-survivors of intimate partner violence and community gun violence. The goal is that, in turn, each will benefit by realizing deeper community ties and trust. Additionally, opportunities will emerge to identify the strengths in each other's programs and develop, re-imagine, or reinvigorate an approach that builds on the progress so far to see dramatic reductions in firearm harm and homicides.

To discuss with BWJP opportunities for us to support efforts in your community, please contact us at info@nrcdvf.org.

Endnotes

- 1 Jacquelyn Campbell et al., *Risk Factors for Femicide in Abusive Relationships: Results from a Multisite Case Control Study*, 93 Am. J. Pub. Health 1089, 1092 (2003).
- 2 Emma E. Fridel and James Alan Fox, *Gender Differences in Patterns and Trends in U.S. Homicide, 1976-2017*, 6 Violence and Gender 1, 27-36 (2019); Neil Websdale et al., *The Domestic Violence Fatality Review Clearinghouse: Introduction To A New National Data System With a Focus On Firearms*, 25 INJ EPIDEMIOL. 6 (2019); Everytown analysis of CDC, National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS), 2021.
- 3 Nearly 1 million American women report having been shot or shot at by an intimate partner and approximately 4.5 million American women report having been threatened by an intimate partner with use of a firearm. Susan Sorenson and Rebecca Schutz, *Nonfatal gun use in intimate partner violence: A systemic review of the literature*, 19 Trauma Violence Abuse 4, 431-442 (2018).
- 4 Battered Women's Justice Project and the National Domestic Violence Hotline, "2024 Domestic Violence and Firearms Report," https://bwjp.org/site-resources/2024-domestic-violence-and-firearms-report/?section_slug=firearms.
- 5 Katherine A. Fowler et al., *Childhood Firearm Injuries in the United States*, 140 PEDIATRICS, 1, 7 (2017).
- 6 Aaron J. Kivisto & Megan Porter, *Firearm Use Increases Risk of Multiple Victims in Domestic Homicides*, 48 J. AM ACAD. PSYCHIATRY & L. 26, 31 (2020).
- 7 Lisa Geller, et al., *The role of domestic violence in fatal mass shootings in the United States, 2014-2019*. 8 Inj. Epidemiol. 1, 38 (2021).
- 8 <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndal/pr/jefferson-county-agencies-awarded-800000-enhance-responses-domestic-violence>
- 9 See Julia J. Lund, et al., *Community-Based Violence Intervention in the Aftermath of Homicide: Community Violence Prevention Specialists' Proximity to and Perspectives on Community Safety and Healing*, 29 Homicide Studies 1, 83-110 (2024); Christina R Kuhrau, et al., *Social Determinants of Health Associated with Intimate Partner Violence in an Urban Obstetric Population*, Am J Perinatol (2024).
- 10 State-level firearm restrictions in domestic violence protection orders and convictions for misdemeanor crimes of domestic violence are associated with significant reductions in intimate partner homicide for white, but not Black, victims. See, Mikaela A. Wallace, et al., *The Association of Federal and State-Level Firearm Restriction Policies With Intimate Partner Homicide: A Re-analysis by Race of the Victim*, 37 J. INTERPERSONAL VIOL. 17-18 (2022).
- 11 See, Vera Institute for Justice, <https://www.vera.org/community-violence-intervention-programs-explained>
- 12 Violence interrupter CVI models have been independently evaluated and are associated with a 30-70% reduction in shootings and killings. See, e.g., Cure Violence Global, "The Evidence of Effectiveness," (Updated 2022), <https://cvg.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Cure-Violence-Evidence-Summary.pdf>; Jason Corburn & Amanda Fukutome-Lopez, "Outcome Evaluation of Advance Peace Sacramento, 2018-19," UC Berkeley Institute of Urban and Regional Development (March 2020), <https://www.advancepeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Corburn-and-F-Lopez-Advance-Peace-Sacramento-2-Year-Evaluation-03-2020.pdf>.



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