

**Summary of Research on Efforts to Reduce Gun Violence in Baltimore City
and Lessons from Other Cities**

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I am Bloomberg Professor of American Health at Johns Hopkins where I have been studying gun violence and its prevention for over 30 years. For nearly 20 years, I have been studying neighborhood trends in gun violence in Baltimore City and place-focused efforts to reduce shootings. I am not here to represent the views of position of the Johns Hopkins University; I have been invited to share my research and expertise relevant to n carrying policies and insights I have drawn through my research in the field.

Community Violence Intervention

My colleagues and I have published three studies conducted to estimate the effects of Safe Streets Baltimore that was first implemented in four neighborhoods between 2007 and 2008 and is now in 10 neighborhoods that had long struggled with high levels of gun violence. Our first study used data from 2004 to 2010 to estimate program effects in the first four sites by contrasting changes in those areas with changes in similar neighborhoods while controlling for key law enforcement activities. Three of the four sites had significant reductions in at least one measure of gun violence.¹ In a 2018 study using a similar study design and data through the end of 2017 to estimate program effects in seven sites, we found that program effectiveness in reducing gun violence and no site showed statistically significant reductions in gun violence.² Using the same data but a new statistical method – synthetic control methods – we also found null effects.³

During the past year, we have collected and analyzed additional data through July 31, 2022, included six new sites in addition to five longer-running sites, and used more advanced and precise statistical methods (augmented synthetic control models). We will be releasing our report from this study at the end of January. I am scheduled to brief city officials and Safe Streets workers prior to public release. I will share the summary findings and conclusions with you and will send Committee members our full report in a matter of weeks.

Using these additional data and improved methods and aggregating effects across all Safe Streets sites, we estimate program effects of approximately 20 percent reductions in homicides and in nonfatal shootings. This works out to an average of one homicide and two nonfatal shootings prevented per site per year and an impressive return on investment given the enormous human and economic costs of gun violence. Program effects over time and across sites were not even and we hope to do more in-depth study to better understand what conditions contribute to or impede program effectiveness.

It is worth noting that Safe Streets is a relatively bare-bones form of community violence intervention (CVI). Over the long course of the program, worker training has been sporadic, pay for workers has been low, and funding of their jobs was uncertain. Relatively few resources have been dedicated over the course of the program to support program participants creating safer lives. Given the challenging of working in communities that have suffered from structural racism and disinvestment with some of the

highest risk individuals in a city awash in guns, it is amazing that Safe Streets violence interrupters have generally been successful in reducing shootings. Increased funding of Safe Streets, enhanced coordination across sites and with other programs, and increased payment and mental wellness supports for workers should increase program effectiveness and facilitate an evolution from a program serving as small number of neighborhoods to a system capable of creating a safer city.

Group Violence Reduction Strategy

I have not been involved in the evaluation of Group Violence Reduction Strategy implemented in Baltimore's Western Police District in 2022; but the data suggests that the program has contributed to significant reductions in shootings. This program model is very challenging to implement, requiring significant resources, coordination and cooperation among partners, and sound management. When done well there is a robust body of evidence that it can produce significant reductions in gun violence and excellent return on investment.⁴ My hope is that Baltimore will follow the successful and transformative experience realized over a span of eight years in Oakland.⁵

Focused, Fair, and Effective Gun Law Enforcement

Clearly, one of the most significant challenges of reducing gun violence in Baltimore is widespread illegal gun possession among individuals with a history of violence and serious criminal involvement. The impact of Maryland's gun laws have been muted by interstate gun trafficking and the surge in privately made firearms. There are many lessons to be learned from Baltimore's experience with proactive gun law enforcement. Research that I led demonstrated that while changes in the number of arrests for illegal gun possession did not appear to reduce shootings, deployment of the Violent Crime Impact Section – a unit officers tasked with suppressing illegal gun possession and gun violence in areas where shootings were most concentrated – was associated with a 13 percent reduction in homicides and a 19% reduction in nonfatal shootings.² This finding is consistent with what has been found in research on specialized gun law enforcement units in hot spots in other cities.

But unconstitutional and racially biased stop and search practices and overuse of incarceration to combat illegal gun possession causes substantial harm to communities most impacted by gun violence. A worse case example of this, of course, is BPD's Gun Trace Task Force whose crimes are now well known and the systemic practices that allowed their criminal acts to occur and persist have been shared with the State Assembly.

In 2020, I authored a report with Center colleagues that focused on reforms to gun law enforcement to increase effectiveness, fairness, and accountability.⁶ Based on a combination of review of prior research and new data collected from residents of communities most impacted by gun violence in Baltimore, we produced 13 findings and eight specific recommendations. I will highlight a few key takeaways from that report.

- Proactive gun law enforcement should be highly focused and intelligence driven to ensure that police and prosecutors are focused on those most responsible for violent crime.
- In partnership with the State's Attorney's Office, BPD should create policies and practices to identify and correct patterns of illegal stops and searches.
- BPD and SAO should share data publicly on stops, arrests for illegal gun possession, dispositions, and cases dropped due to illegal stops or searches or evidence tampering.

- There is no research evidence that mandatory minimums or long sentences for illegal gun possession reduce homicides and shootings.
- City and State officials, in collaboration with community-based organizations working with those at high risk for involvement in gun violence and researchers, should develop and implement a program to reduce risks for future involvement in violence for those arrests for illegal gun possession. The program could either be a diversion from traditional prosecution and adjudication or as part of probation conditions.

Cited Research

¹ Webster DW, Whitehill JM, Vernick JS, Curriero FC. Effects of Baltimore's Safe Streets Program on gun violence: a replication of Chicago's CeaseFire program. *Journal of Urban Health* 2013; 90:27-40. doi: 10.1007/s11524-012-9731-5

² Webster DW, Buggs SAL, Crifasi CK. Estimating the Effects of Law Enforcement and Public Health Interventions to Reduce Gun Violence in Baltimore. Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, January 2018.

³ Buggs SAL, Webster DW, Crifasi CK. Using synthetic control methodology to estimate effects of a Cure Violence intervention in Baltimore, Maryland. *Injury Prevention* 2021; 28(1):61-67. doi: 10.1136/injuryprev-2020-044056.

⁴ Braga AA, Weisburd D, Turchan B. Focused deterrence strategies and crime control: An updated systematic review and meta-analysis of empirical evidence. *Criminology & Public Policy* 2018; 17(1):205-250. DOI:10.1111/1745-9133.12353

⁵ Braga AA et al. Oakland Ceasefire Evaluation: Final Report to the City of Oakland. May 2019. <https://cao-94612.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/Oakland-Ceasefire-Evaluation-Final-Report-May-2019.pdf>

⁶ Webster DW, Crifasi CK, Williams RG, Booty MD, Buggs SAL. [Reducing Violence and Building Trust: Data to Guide Gun Law Enforcement in Baltimore](#). Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, June 2020.