



## **Protecting Californians from Community Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In the midst of the devastating coronavirus pandemic, California’s leaders have demonstrated a strong commitment to protecting Californians’ health and safety. At the same time, cycles of community violence continue to imperil families across the state, particularly [in the communities most vulnerable](#) to the virus’ spread, related economic harms, and devastating expected budget cuts.

This document was produced by a coalition of more than 40 organizations, and more than 150 individual practitioners, advocates, city leaders, and researchers from across California who are dedicated to making California’s communities safer for all. **As detailed below, we urge California policymakers to keep violence interrupters on the job and saving lives during this period of crisis by:**

- **Protecting California’s critical investments in the California Violence Intervention and Prevention (CalVIP) program**
- **Leveraging federal funding from the Victims of Crime Act and federal CARES Act to support existing violence intervention organizations and supplement CalVIP’s support**
- **Ensuring that violence intervention workers are exempt from shelter-in-place-orders and recognized as essential services providers to continue their vital work to protect the public**

## **Our Cities are Battling Two Public Health Crises**

California's ongoing violence epidemic is deeply entwined with the coronavirus pandemic, as both public health crises [tragically amplify the other's harms](#). Panic buying has led guns and [ghost gun products](#) to fly off the shelves at [unprecedented rates](#). Researchers have found that previous, smaller spikes in weapon sales (such as gun sale booms following the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting) were associated with increased firearm injury in [California's cities](#) and [nationally](#), and research is clear that where there are more guns, [there are](#), tragically, [more homicides](#) too.

Shelter in place orders have temporarily limited some individuals' exposure to violence, but for others, such as families where domestic violence is an issue, isolation and limited access to resources combined with increased access to firearms has created additional risks. There are reports of [increased calls](#) to hotlines and service providers; we know that it is [five times more likely](#) a female partner will be killed when their partner who has been abusive has access to a firearm.

Outside the home, some cities have recently reported [drops in crime overall](#), but shootings and [community violence have unfortunately continued unabated in far, far too many communities](#). In California, records from the Gun Violence Archive show a slight *increase* in firearm fatalities in [March 2020](#) compared to the [previous month](#) and to the same time period [last year](#). Mayors and officials around the nation [have pleaded with](#) residents to halt cycles of shootings and retaliations as their communities "[battle two public health crises](#): coronavirus and gun violence." The City of Chicago [suffered](#) its "most violent day of 2020 so far" on April 7th.

And in the coming weeks, trauma experts warn, shootings are [likely to become even more fatal](#) as health and public safety systems are increasingly stretched thin. Victims of violence and COVID-19 patients must compete for strapped healthcare resources, including [ambulances, ICU beds, and ventilators](#). Across the country, roughly 80,000 people are admitted to emergency rooms and 20,000 are [admitted to ICUs](#) for gunshot wounds each year. Many of these patients require [large quantities of blood](#) to stay alive, [10 times as much blood](#) as other trauma patients on average. This poses an especially grave challenge now, as our healthcare systems are battling a "severe shortage" of both [blood](#) and [ICU](#) resources. In New York City, roughly 20% of ambulance workers [are out sick](#), leading to [warnings](#) of a "serious decline in ambulance services" and reports of hundreds of ambulance calls at a time left on hold. As homicide investigations [become increasingly depleted](#), hampered, and unsuccessful, a desperate and traumatized few may also become more likely to turn to retaliatory violence after a loved one's loss.

## **The Critical Role of Professional Violence Interrupters**

At the intersection of these interrelated crises are violence intervention workers—also known as street outreach workers, violence interrupters, neighborhood change agents, and gang intervention workers—who serve on the frontlines during outbreaks of violence and now are joining other emergency response workers on the front lines of a global pandemic. These trained professionals skillfully defuse potentially violent situations and [disrupt cycles of retaliatory violence](#) by providing individuals and families at highest risk of violence with a range of direct support services including conflict mediation, case management, trauma-informed mentoring, cognitive behavioral therapy, employment training, and access to housing and other basic necessities.

Vulnerable communities need these trusted resources now more than ever, especially if cash-strapped cities and community-based organizations are unable to sustain broader local investments. During previous economic downturns, cities [like Chicago](#) that lost state funding for violence intervention and street outreach programs saw violence significantly increase as a result. Preserving support for violence interrupters' lifesaving work is a necessary and cost-effective measure to prevent cycles of violence and retaliation from taking root in times of distress.

This is an extraordinary and challenging moment, and difficult budget decisions undoubtedly lie ahead. At the same time, we cannot lose sight of the need to protect families from the ongoing public health crisis of community violence. In recent years, violence has killed as many young African American men and boys in California as nearly every other cause of death *combined*, and has been a leading marker of inequality in the state: nearly 90% of gun homicide victims killed before the age of 18 in California are African American or Latinx.

California's budgets have typically not reflected the moral urgency of these facts. As leading sociologist Andrew Papachristos [writes](#), "America's haves and have-nots are divided not just by how much people earn, where they went to school or what car they drive, but more fundamentally by whether they feel safe when they tuck their kids in at night." During this period of global crisis and uncertainty, it is as important as ever to keep our essential violence interrupters on the job, keeping the peace, and protecting life in our communities.

To keep our communities safe, we urge California lawmakers to take the following actions:

### **1) Protect Funding for the California Violence Intervention and Prevention Program**

In California, the main source of state support for violence intervention work is the California Violence Intervention and Prevention (CalVIP) program. CalVIP provides competitive matching

grants to local, community-based violence intervention efforts in cities that are most impacted by shootings and group-related violence. Critically, for the 2019-2020 Budget, California tripled the amount of funding allocated for CalVIP community violence intervention efforts, and enacted [legislation](#) to ensure these funds are spent as effectively and justly as possible.

These investments have been making a transformative difference: in recent years, **programs funded by CalVIP have been credited with reducing homicides by 34–79%** and have helped make CalVIP a national model for violence prevention legislation introduced or enacted in other states, in the [US Congress](#), and in Vice President Biden’s [gun policy platform](#).

From 2016 to 2018, cities with a CalVIP-funded violence prevention program saw homicides decline nearly *three times more* than localities that did not receive CalVIP support. These efforts helped California reduce gun homicides among African American men and boys by an impressive 21% between 2017 and 2018 alone, while also finally reversing what had been a steady three-year spike in gun homicides among Latino men and boys. Evaluations of CalVIP-funded programs show that this investment is working:

- A study found that Richmond’s Operation Peacemaker Fellowship, an intensive violence intervention program, contributed to a citywide [55% drop](#) in gun-related homicides and assaults between 2010 and 2016.
- In Oakland, a network of violence intervention organizations is at the heart of a violence reduction strategy credited with helping reduce homicides and shootings [nearly 50%](#) from 2012 to 2018.
- Since launching the Mayor’s Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development in 2007, which includes a robust violence intervention as a central strategy, Los Angeles has seen a more than 34% reduction in homicides and a more than 44% drop in nonfatal shootings.

Studies have also found that investments in violence prevention are **highly cost-effective** too, particularly when compared to the tremendous economic toll of gun violence:

- A recent study by the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform found that a *single* homicide imposes average direct costs to California taxpayers of [\\$2.5 million](#).
- Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence estimates that ongoing shootings cost California more than [\\$6.5 billion per year](#) in direct expenses, including healthcare and law enforcement costs.
- Researchers estimated that Massachusetts taxpayers [saved about \\$7](#) for every dollar invested in a grant program similar to CalVIP.
- An independent cost-benefit analysis of the Operation Peacemaker program supported by CalVIP in Richmond, California, found that by spending a little over \$5 million over a

five-year period, Operation Peacemaker [saved over \\$500 million](#) from averted homicides alone.

**An investment in violence intervention programs pays for itself many times over.**

We strongly urge lawmakers to keep violence interrupters on the job by protecting state support for their lifesaving and cost-effective work. When other states have cut funding for violence intervention work during tight financial times, painful spikes in violence have followed. In Illinois, for example, despite consistently impressive outcomes, state-funded violence intervention work suffered major funding lapses in 2007, 2011, and 2015. Each of these lapses [corresponded](#) in time and place with significant increases in rates of violence in Chicago, the city with the highest concentration of funded program sites. These upticks in violence were reversed only after state funding was restored.

**We urge California leaders to work to preserve CalVIP funding at 2019 levels.** Amid the coronavirus pandemic, other states like [Virginia](#) and [Washington](#) are continuing to protect and expand investments in violence prevention. California should continue to lead the nation in sustaining this work vital to communities' health and safety.

**Local leaders in communities with high levels of violence should also prioritize ongoing investments in violence intervention work and be prepared to apply for CalVIP funds.** For the current CalVIP grant application period, which has been [paused and likely extended](#) to June due to the pandemic, BSCC should make it a priority to disburse funds as quickly as possible once the application process resumes. By statute, this funding is available to cities with disproportionately high levels of serious violence. Information regarding qualifying cities, application deadlines, and other information is available on the [BSCC website](#).

**2) Leverage Federal Resources to Support Existing Violence Intervention Organizations**

With increasing limitations on general funds, state leaders should look to leverage federal resources to support violence intervention work and take steps to ensure that violence intervention organizations are aware of these resources.

**The CARES Act**

The most immediate stopgap source of federal support came from the recently enacted Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (The CARES Act), which included direct financial support for some nonprofit organizations through the [Payroll Protection Program](#) (PPP).

Under PPP, nonprofit organizations can apply for low-interest loans on a first-come-first-serve basis to cover two-and-a-half months of payroll costs. These loans will [generally be waived](#) as long as the borrowing organization maintains staffing levels and limits payroll reductions to no more than 25%. However, this limited funding stream has already been [fully depleted](#) as of April 16th, and requires an additional, meaningful infusion of funding to help keep eligible community-based non-profits afloat.

**California leaders should ensure that organizations providing violence intervention services are aware of the federal resources as they become available through the CARES Act and future federal relief efforts.**

### **The Victims of Crime Act**

The federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) also presents an opportunity for California to leverage federal resources to sustain critical violence intervention work with individuals who have been victims of or witnesses to violence and who may be at [elevated risk](#) for related trauma, re-injury, and involvement in future violence. Through VOCA Assistance grants, the federal government provides annual block grants to all 50 states to be re-distributed to agencies and organizations that provide services to crime victims. In California, the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES) administers this grant, which is a significant source of funding: in 2018 alone, California received nearly \$400 million in VOCA Assistance funds.

As of 2016, federal regulations require that at least 10% of VOCA assistance awards be allocated to programs that serve “previously underserved populations of victims of violent crime.” The US Office for Victims of Crime has noted that “victims of gang violence,” “victims of violent crime in high crime areas,” “victims of physical assault,” and “survivors of homicide victims,” are all “often underserved.” But like many other states, California has typically not used these federal crime victim dollars to meaningfully invest in violence intervention programs working with victims of violence.

States have enormous discretion in awarding VOCA assistance funds and in recent years governors and attorneys general in states including [New Jersey](#), [Illinois](#), [Pennsylvania](#), [Virginia](#), and [Maryland](#) have taken executive action to use discretionary federal VOCA Assistance funds to support violence intervention efforts focused on individuals at highest risk of injury from community violence.

**We urge California's leaders to ensure OES taps this large source of federal funding to supplement CalVIP's investment in critical violence intervention work.** We have urged OES to establish a competitive grant program to award at least \$10 million per year for the next three years to programs that provide violence intervention services to victims of community violence

at highest risk of reinjury.

### **3) Ensure Violence Intervention Workers are Exempt from Shelter-in-Place Orders and Recognized as Essential Service Providers**

Finally, we urge policymakers to ensure that critical violence intervention workers can continue to do their jobs by exempting them from shelter-in-place orders and taking steps to ensure they have the training and equipment they need to safely conduct their lifesaving work, including safety equipment and access to state-subsidized child care services for children of essential critical infrastructure workers, pursuant to Governor Newsom's April 4th [Executive Order](#).

Violence intervention workers are working to keep the peace and provide critical support, counseling, and information in communities at elevated risk to both the virus and its economic fallout, due to systemic racism, income inequality, and misinformation about the nature of the virus. These professionals are often some of the only people trusted by individuals disconnected from other channels of authority or information, and have a meaningful role to play in providing ongoing support, counseling, and conflict mediation at times of heightened trauma and uncertainty. In a neighborhood in unincorporated South Los Angeles, for example, violence intervention workers have partnered with a local grocery store to help prevent looting and ensure community members are informed about social distancing.

In recognition of the important role that violence intervention workers play in maintaining public health and safety, the City of Los Angeles has [specifically exempted](#) “gang and crisis intervention workers” from shelter-in-place restrictions so that they may continue to provide their vital services as “emergency personnel” and essential community service providers. Similarly, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot issued a public letter stating that the mayor’s office “has designated street outreach partners as essential staff during this challenging time. The role of street outreach is to mediate conflicts, be a support to those that are at high risk for perpetrating violence and being victimized, and to relentlessly echo the ‘stay at home’ message to the community. This work is endorsed by the Chicago Police Department and other City of Chicago departments.”

**By following the policy recommendations outlined above, California leaders can support the indispensable field of professional violence intervention workers serving at the front lines of two of the most pressing public health crises of our time.**