



Managing Multiple Pandemics: How Street Outreach Workers Are Addressing Gun Violence and COVID-19

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“Managing Multiple Epidemics: How Street Outreach Workers Are Addressing Gun Violence and COVID-19”

by the **Northwestern Neighborhood & Network Initiative (N3)**
at the Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University

Introduction

After another morning of talking through every shooting in Chicago in the previous 24 hours, one of Chicago’s most respected violence prevention leaders wearily reflected, **“This is summer in Chicago in the middle of a pandemic. This is one of the worst times [I’ve seen].”**

His words convey the exhaustion street outreach workers feel as 2020 continues to take its toll on the city. Every day in Chicago, about 180 street outreach workers spread throughout the city’s neighborhoods to engage community members at highest risk of becoming involved in gun violence. Outreach workers respond to shooting incidents by inserting themselves into the social networks of those involved with and impacted by gun violence, visiting hospitals to offer support and cool tempers, and attending funerals to mourn and help prevent retaliatory violence. They spend the rest of their days mentoring local residents, connecting participants with social services, and mediating conflicts between disputing street crews.

As outreach workers responded to this year’s spate of gun violence, they found themselves thrust onto the frontlines of another new and frightening epidemic impacting Chicago’s neighborhoods, COVID-19. Data show that the neighborhoods covered by outreach workers affiliated with **Communities Partnering 4 Peace (CP4P)** were the very same neighborhoods with Chicago’s highest rates of COVID-19. These areas have also been hardest hit by the ensuing economic recession and have been, historically, disproportionately impacted by the police violence and systemic racism that are once again receiving national attention. In “normal” times, street outreach workers would be connecting their constituents to social services like legal aid and restorative justice programs, employment support, and trauma-informed behavioral health counseling. During the COVID pandemic, however, organizations have expanded street outreach workers’ job duties. As the pandemic unfolded, the city and their communities leaned on outreach workers for greater and expanded types of support: disseminating public health education, distributing critical supplies like food and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and adapting violence reduction tactics to neighborhood conflicts impacted by widespread stay-at-home orders.

Key Findings: Street Outreach Strategies during COVID-19



Expanding the public health role of street outreach



Deepening outreach with those most at-risk



Addressing conflicts started on social media



Strengthening solidarity amid low worker morale



Increasing communication about outreach amid scrutiny

As the research partner for CP4P, the **Northwestern Neighborhood and Networks Initiative** (N3) uses quantitative and qualitative methods to study the impact of street outreach. When COVID-19 hit Chicago in early 2020, CP4P and N3 adapted these research activities to include an investigation of how COVID-19 has affected local gun violence and street outreach efforts.

This report is based on findings from field notes gathered during daily citywide calls with street outreach organizations in Chicago (March 2020 to present), interviews with street outreach participants prior to COVID-19, and interviews conducted virtually with street outreach workers in the summer of 2020.¹ Daily calls included strategic discussions related to shootings from the previous day or weekend, coordination across organizations, and management of urgent issues related to COVID-19 or other crises impacting street outreach activities and efforts to reduce gun violence. The interviews with street outreach workers covered their individual personal backgrounds, job responsibilities and relationships, and responses to COVID-19. The goal of this report is to describe how street outreach adapted to managing both COVID-19 and gun violence.

¹ The street outreach worker interviews and daily meeting observations included discussions with all 15 CP4P organizations and other Chicago street outreach groups. The research team conducted 16 focus groups with 5–10 CP4P participants from the original eight organizations that formed CP4P. They also conducted 16 interviews with CP4P participants, two from each organization. The focus groups and interviews explored four questions: 1) What influence, if any, does street outreach have on participant mindset, values, and perceptions; 2) What influence, if any, does street outreach have on participants' integration into their local communities; 3) How do participants measure progress and define success and failure; and 4) Which outreach interactions matter more or less to participants?

The Existing Epidemic: CP4P Takes on Gun Violence

In major cities like Chicago, the public narrative often centers on how violence has “gotten out of hand,” particularly during the summer months, when gun violence tends to peak. Often, this narrative contributes to a widespread fear that gun violence could happen to anyone, anywhere, and at any time. While every shooting is tragic, the vast majority of gun violence is not random. Rather, it is concentrated within certain geographical areas and social networks.²

“[My outreach worker is] working for multiple communities...I can only imagine the stress he got on himself, and on top of that he’s a dad! Man, by itself it’s stressful, and he finds time for it all.”

—CP4P Participant

Before COVID-19, street outreach organizations had already been preparing for another challenging year. Residents of the communities where CP4P organizations operate experience crime and gun violence at a rate three times the citywide average. While rates of gun violence fluctuate from year to year, these communities have experienced the city’s highest rates of gun violence for decades. Inside these communities, gun violence concentrates within smaller social networks, with shootings spreading from person-to-person in a pattern that eerily resembles other viral epidemics. According to an early analysis by N3, **CP4P participants run a 370% greater risk of being shot** than non-CP4P participants.

To address this violence, CP4P street outreach workers have formed relationships with individuals who are most likely to shoot or be shot. In focus groups and interviews—collaboratively led by N3 and CP4P —participants reported admiring their outreach workers as heroes, mentors, and sources of emotional and material support. **When asked about the most meaningful interactions with street outreach**, participants talked about their outreach workers being there for them during dark times, consistently intervening when they needed help, providing positive mentorship, and connecting them with resources and opportunities (e.g., employment support, legal assistance, community service, recreation).

In the first few months of 2020, Chicago business and social life began to shut down due to shelter-in-place orders, yet incidents of gun violence spiked. While most Chicagoans were encouraged to stay off of the streets, outreach workers were asked to be more active than ever. Violence mediation and prevention is incredibly complex and grueling work that involves trying to find and engage disputing parties, often in multiple meetings in various neighborhoods. In a normal year, the work adds up. In 2019 alone, CP4P organizations mediated nearly 1,500 disputes. As gun violence began to escalate, so did the need for mediation, participant support, and

² Papachristos, A. V., C. Wildeman, and E. Roberto. 2015. Tragic, but not random: The social contagion of nonfatal gunshot injuries. *Social Science & Medicine* 125:139–50.

counseling. With only 180 street outreach workers covering a population of nearly 3 million people, demands for violence prevention exceed the available resources.

The Second Epidemic: COVID-19 Hits Chicago

The COVID-19 epidemic required even more from street outreach workers, on top of the already steep demands of rising gun violence. In Chicago, the neighborhoods with the highest rates of gun violence also have the city's highest rates of confirmed COVID-19 cases. Most of these neighborhoods are home to Black and Latinx residents. The zip code with the highest rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases, 60623 in Little Village and North Lawndale, has a rate of 2.7 violent crimes per 1,000 people compared to a citywide rate of 1.5 violent crimes per 1,000 people.

In April, as it became increasingly clear that COVID-19 would require long-term and far-reaching public health solutions, Chicago street outreach organizations accelerated their plans to extend outreach hours and activities over the summer. While they prepared for the anticipated increase in violence, outreach organizations coordinated with city officials to rapidly develop COVID public education materials, protocols to ensure their own safety, and programs to help neighborhood residents affected by the virus and its impact. As protests against police violence spread throughout Chicago in June, street outreach workers extended their hours and scope of operation even further.

A Third Epidemic: Racism and Police Violence

The neighborhoods where CP4P organizations operate are not only the areas of Chicago with the highest rates of gun violence and COVID-19, they also have the highest rates of police misconduct allegations.

“This is the most down I’ve been in the work ever.”

–Street Outreach Worker

Outreach workers have had to navigate tension between community members and the police, and their own relationships with local law enforcement. Police sometimes stop outreach workers during their duties, despite their essential worker status during the pandemic. Following the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, protests and looting spread from downtown Chicago throughout South and West Side neighborhoods. Some outreach workers barely slept, mediating not just potential gun violence, but disagreements between gangs, protesters, and business owners, and dealing with the presence of anti-riot police units.

How Street Outreach Has Adapted to COVID-19 and the Civil Unrest

Illinois's shelter-in-place order was announced on March 20, 2020. Mayor Lightfoot and Governor Pritzker ordered all non-essential businesses and facilities closed and urged residents to stay indoors except for necessities. As the city closed down, several logistical challenges to street outreach work immediately surfaced:

Outreach offices had to shut down, transitional job sites became inaccessible, CP4P-planned community gatherings were cancelled, and face-to-face contact was discouraged. Street outreach organizations quickly mobilized to meet their communities' needs and coordinated with the city to continue services, however possible. Daily coordination calls, which had been held pre-COVID, became an essential forum for strategy, coping, and encouragement. The following themes are drawn from four months of field notes taken during these daily coordination calls and outreach worker interviews. Analysis suggests **five** ways COVID-19 has changed the context and approach of violence prevention in Chicago and how street outreach organizations have adapted.

1. Expanding the Public Health Role of Street Outreach Workers

- Street outreach workers were on the front line of multiple crises and their credibility was tapped in new ways. Outreach workers were relied upon to communicate public health and COVID-related information to their participants, their families, and the broader community. Coordinating with city public health officials, they helped community members navigate confusion over COVID transmission risks and symptoms—for example, dispelling ideas that certain racial groups were immune to the virus.
- COVID-19 pushed street outreach organizations' efforts to provide material and economic support for their communities. They delivered personal protective supplies to hard-to-reach communities, distributed food, clothing, toiletries and other essential supplies. Outreach organizations worked frantically to expand their own resources to help meet the growing demand.
- Street outreach workers also had to address the concurrent increases in domestic violence and mental health crises that accompanied the pandemic and the stay-at-home-orders. These demands required new skills, new strategies, and a broader public health approach, all while continuing a core anti-violence mission.



2. Deepening Outreach to Most At-Risk Participants

- Outreach workers across organizations shared concerns about participant progress in education and employment programming being threatened due to site closures and increases in unemployment. They also recognized that outreach participants will be especially hard hit as the economic crisis may hinder employer partnerships that outreach organizations rely on.
- Opportunities for stable participation in the mainstream economy have been a key incentive for outreach participation. There are very real concerns that, now and in the future, COVID-19's economic impact may further deplete resources from already marginalized communities. Participants may return to the underground economy or "play both sides," potentially risking program gains and feeding back into gun violence.



- Watching out for participants at particular risk of back-sliding required time and energy-intensive approaches from outreach workers, including house visits, multiple calls a day, temporary relocations, and full-family engagement. This strained already high caseloads.

3. Addressing Conflicts Started on Social Media



- With residents spending more and more time online and at home, street outreach had to become more active on social media (a shift that had already been in progress) to monitor and diffuse conflicts being agitated digitally. In response, street outreach has developed new strategies and campaigns to respond to inflammatory online content.
- While most online activity never leads to violence, some street outreach workers believe the shelter-in-place restrictions resulted in restlessness and boredom that only exacerbated pre-existing tensions.

4. Strengthening Outreach Worker Solidarity Amid Low Morale



- Many street outreach workers have lost relatives and neighbors to COVID-19 as the intensity and trauma of their daily jobs has increased. They worry about their own safety and the safety of their loved ones, as their front-line jobs put them at increased risk of COVID-19 transmission.
- After the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and the subsequent civil unrest, outreach workers expressed fatigue and frustration with the confluence of challenges facing their neighborhoods: COVID-19, gun violence, poverty, and police violence.
- Despite managing multiple challenges, outreach workers rallied around each other, creating a sense of group solidarity that was strengthened by shared experiences. Coordination calls frequently included discussion and education on self-care, wellness, and outreach worker needs. The ritual of connecting daily through these calls and sharing intense experiences cultivate feelings of solidarity that sustain outreach workers while their professional role continues to change and expand.

5. Increasing Communication About Street Outreach Amid Scrutiny



- As the summer months approached, outreach workers predicted an increase in violence that would coincide with the city's reopening in June. They described the summer as a "perfect storm" of warm weather, pent-up energy, no school or work, and economic hardship. Summer in Chicago began with a Memorial Day Weekend that was the most violent in 5 years, receiving nationwide attention.
- Despite the obstacles faced by their staffs and communities, street outreach organizations know that stakeholders will demand a return for the recently increased public investment in violence prevention. Outreach workers feel mounting pressure to reduce shootings and expressed

frustration over lack of recognition for their role in combatting both COVID-19 and gun violence. CP4P leaders and outreach workers have increased their public and street engagement to communicate how they are addressing the increase in violence. They feel the pain of every shooting that they cannot prevent but try to communicate what the city might look like without them.

“Coronavirus is real, but what’s happening in our communities is also a reality. We have to deal with that reality on the ground. This is the most dire situation I’ve been involved with in my life. There’s so much confusion in our community. We got a pandemic. Our kids are killing each other. There’s the economic strain. Police killing people. We passed out food and some people stood in line for nine hours. It was unbelievable. This is the time we have to be active. We have to hit the streets. My team is seven-days-a-week active right now.”

–Street Outreach Worker

The **Northwestern Neighborhood & Network Initiative (N3)** promotes new ways for faculty, experts, and students at Northwestern University’s Institute for Policy Research to engage communities, civic partners, and policymakers to address core problems facing the residents of Chicago and surrounding communities. Specific projects and types of engagement will be linked by a focus on how the social relationships among networks, geographic communities, and the constellation of groups, organizations, and civic partners affect what we feel, think, and do—and how understanding, building, and leveraging this sort of network-thinking can improve neighborhoods, the city, and our region.

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