

**SPECIAL ESSAY****RESPONSE TO WHAT WORKS WITH GANGS**

# Response to “What works with gangs: A breakthrough”

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The November 2018 issue of *Criminology & Public Policy* includes the policy essay “What Works with Gangs: A Breakthrough” (Howell, 2018). In this essay, Howell addressed, in part, the Group Violence Intervention, or GVI, the dominant current name for a portfolio of “focused deterrence” interventions that began with “Operation Ceasefire” in Boston more than 20 years ago and that has since been developed, refined, and seen wide implementation (Braga, Weisburd, & Turchan, 2018). In the essay, Howell stated that:

*The Group Violence Intervention (GVI) is a problem-oriented policing deterrence project that instituted a zero-tolerance policy for any law-breaking activity on the part of identified individuals, with the aim of reducing homicide (Kennedy, 2010). High-rate violent offenders with histories of gang-related crimes (identified through a review of police arrest records in a problem analysis) are notified in a community meeting (to which they are invited) that they are subject to long prison sentences for any subsequent offenses, probation, or parole violations. In these community meetings, federal, state, and local law enforcement authorities communicate emphatically that violence will no longer be tolerated (Braga and Hureau, 2012: 134). Successful convictions that drew long federal sentences are widely publicized in the community to deter others. In various ceasefire sites, a menu of “sticks” and “carrots” was offered to offenders. Sticks were a range of sanctions or “levers” used to encourage gang members to desist from violence, notifying gang members that (a) all of them would be held accountable for violence committed by any one of them and that (b) violent crime surely would have consequences (i.e., long prison sentences). (Howell, 2018, p. 993)*

This is almost completely wrong, not only in its details but also in its disregard for the core understanding of violence dynamics that informs GVI; for its resultant theory of action; and for the additional goals, beyond violence prevention, that it seeks to achieve.<sup>1</sup> GVI is most fundamentally premised on the central finding across large numbers of jurisdictions that homicide and gun violence are concentrated among small numbers of extremely high-risk groups, with aggregate members of all such groups typically representing at or less than one half of 1% of the population while being connected to half to

three quarters or more of all homicides (Lurie, 2019). It is further premised on the recognition that the violence in question is driven by group dynamics that cannot be understood or addressed by attention to individuals: that, for example, a long-standing vendetta or “beef” between two such groups will not be much affected by, say, arresting and incarcerating each of the last shooters from each side because these actions leave both the groups and the vendetta in place and have little or no preventive effect on subsequent violence. It is further premised on the notion that homicide and other serious violence are special and deserve special attention, above and beyond other crime and public safety issues. Beyond that, it is informed by the realization that high-risk groups and group members experience shockingly high levels of victimization and trauma; that they and their communities have frequently been exposed to profligate and damaging policing and criminal justice practices; and that it is essential to reduce the exercise of state authority as much as possible, to build the legitimacy of the police and other authorities, and to build trust between the authorities and communities. (As the approach has evolved, some of its original authors now argue that the growing focus on supporting and protecting those at high risk, on strengthening communities, and on legitimacy makes the “focused deterrence” label a fundamental misnomer (Kennedy, Kleiman, & Braga, 2017)). And beyond that, it is in practice predicated on the fact that front-line law enforcement and community insight into group and violence dynamics are invariably far richer and more accurate than any formal or administrative data, and it puts a premium on drawing on that insight.

Thus—and contrary to the description provided by Howell in “What Works With Gangs”—GVI is focused on groups, not on individuals; is focused on violence, not on overall criminality; does not act (primarily) by changing the behavior of those called into the meetings in question; pays no attention whatsoever to any general offending or violations of probation or parole conditions, much less makes the (absurd) promise of long prison sentences for any such acts; not only does it not promise “long prison sentences,” but it seeks to avoid them as much as possible; does not advertise such sanctions in communities; does not identify group members through analysis of criminal records or any similar profiling or methodology but through front-line qualitative methods; and is not a “carrot-and-stick” approach but one that leans heavily on protecting those at high risk and on mobilizing informal community social control to reduce violence and public safety without deploying either enforcement or social services.

In practice, this means that high-risk groups are identified through the direct experience and knowledge of front-line practitioners, and without any of the well-understood problems that come with attempting to assess dangerousness through analyzing criminal records, formal definitions of “gangs,” and the like (Kennedy, 2009; Kennedy, Braga, & Piehl, 1998). Group members on probation or parole are directed as a condition of their supervisory status—not “invited”—to a “call-in” or “forum.” The call-in is a way of communicating with groups in the community and is not about, as a primary matter, the individuals present: The group members are there as messengers back to their groups. The messages in the call-in are about violence, not about general criminality, and about the groups involved, not (primarily) about those group members present in the room. No promises are made about any special consequences for general offending, and subsequent general offending by call-in members is in most cases not even monitored. Several core messages are communicated: that there is a deep commitment to keeping group members alive, unhurt, and out of jail and prison; that there are absolute community standards against homicide and gun violence; that there is meaningful assistance available for group members who want it; and that certain acts of serious violence will be met with sanctions against the *groups* from which the violence emerges. In practice that usually means that action is promised with respect to the group involved in the *next* group-associated homicide after each such meeting, and with respect to the *most violent* group in the jurisdiction. When those promises are deemed by groups to be credible

and refreshed reasonably regularly, they serve to greatly deter overall violence while minimizing actual enforcement.

When such actions need to be taken, what matters is not that individual offenders are met with severe sanctions, but that—to affect the group dynamics that drive violence—groups know that a threshold number of *all* members will experience *some* consequence. These can in practice be small—an enhancement of probation or parole conditions, warrant service, interference with money-making activity, civil action to interfere with stolen power and cable service, and the like—and the strategy is frequently associated with substantial reductions in arrest (e.g., Engle, Corsaro, & Ozer, 2017). Where high-level sanctions exist in law or are delivered in practice, those facts are communicated to group members, but draconian sanctions are not normal, are not promised, and of course could not in practice be routinely produced. A central thesis of focused deterrence is that official promises of severe sanctions for ordinary offending behavior cannot be kept and lack all credibility, that the “experiential affect” teaches seasoned offenders that such promises are hollow and not to trust authorities when they make them, and that a key objective of focused deterrence is to build credibility where currently there is none (Minor & Harry, 1982). And in keeping with both the oldest and the newest thinking about deterrence, what matters in practice is not severity, no matter how thinking invariably turns to it, but certainty and swiftness.<sup>2</sup>

Scholarship and evidence-based practice are properly attentive to the data and methods that lead to conclusions about the impact (or the lack thereof) of particular interventions. It should be as attentive to the accuracy of representations of the interventions themselves. I appreciate this opportunity afforded by the editors to set the record straight.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The misconceptions here are unfortunately not unusual. For a longer correction of such misconceptions as published in the popular press, see the letter to the editor of *The Nation* at <https://nnscommunities.org/uploads/Kennedy-The-Nation-Response-final2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Nearly all of the points made here about the logic and implementation of the GVI strategy can be found in National Network for Safe Communities (2016).

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## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

**David M. Kennedy** is a professor of criminal justice and the director of the National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. Mr. Kennedy and the National Network support cities implementing strategic interventions to reduce violence, minimize arrest and incarceration, enhance police legitimacy, and strengthen relationships between law enforcement and communities. These interventions have been proven effective in a variety of settings and are currently being implemented in Chicago, New York City, Detroit, the states of Connecticut and New York, and elsewhere. Mr. Kennedy's work has won two Ford Foundation Innovations in Government awards, among many other distinctions. His latest book is *Don't Shoot, One Man, a Street Fellowship, and the End of Violence in Inner-City America*.

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The Group Violence Intervention (GVI), known locally as Ceasefire, has crucial components that are integral to a successful implementation. Below is an overview of these various components of the strategy that are crucial in working toward the first call-in and then need to be maintained regularly thereafter.

This document will cover the following topics that are required before getting to a first call-in: conducting the problem analysis, getting key partner commitments and organization structures in place, identifying the community moral voices, establishing a robust support and outreach structure, carrying out a demonstration enforcement action, and planning the call-in itself. After the call-in, there are crucial next steps and follow ups including: deploying custom notifications, tracking and follow through on the law enforcement and support and outreach commitments made at the call-in, regular working group and subcommittee meetings, regular group audits, and regularly scheduled call-ins in response to the violence dynamics in that particular area.

While Ceasefire is active in all bureaus, under the new leadership of GND it is important to reconsider the operational basics of GVI as we move forward together.

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- Problem analysis

Design work for GVI begins by assessing the facts on the ground (i.e., who and what are driving serious violence) to design an operation that addresses the actual situation. The analysis consists of two research exercises: a group audit and incident review. The group audit results in a current, accurate snapshot of active street groups, relationships, and members which may not exist in any organized form. The incident review assesses the nature of group involvement in recent homicides and shootings. The exercise helps determine the need for group-targeted enforcement and identifies which groups are the most violent and dangerous. It can also lead to an understanding of the relationships between groups and violence, as well as the specific types of violence and the context of incidents.

The results of the analysis allow the implementation team to focus their resources strategically on the groups that are in fact driving the violence, and ensure that the right people are coming to call-ins and receiving custom notifications. These processes should be maintained by the law enforcement operational group on a regular basis through implementation. The problem analysis could be conducted at the bureau or division level depending on the number of groups and shooting incidents.

- Key commitments and structures in place

GVI requires commitment and support from the key agency leaders in the city, which includes but is not limited to the Mayor, Chief of Police, District Attorney, US Attorney, Probation/Parole Director, GRYD, and any other key agency that's involved in the strategy as well as a representative from the



community. These representatives comprise a governing board that holds the strategy accountable and ensures the work is moving forward with fidelity to the model. They can problem solve and assess and allocate resources when needed.

Additionally, Ceasefire requires someone or multiple people to serve as full time senior-level project managers (or Bureau Coordinators in this case). The project manager(s) oversees and coordinates the overall effort of Ceasefire, including all three main components of the strategy (community, support and outreach, and law enforcement). Ideally, there is a citywide coordinator who is dedicated full time to work with and guide all Bureau Coordinators to facilitate consistency across bureaus. The Bureau Coordinators and citywide coordinator should be senior enough to have decision making authority and the ability to problem solve at a high level when needed.

Lastly, a Working Group, chaired by the bureau coordinators/citywide coordinator, comprised of a small and stable membership of core representatives from law enforcement, the community, and social services meet regularly and coordinate the actions of their respective operational teams. The three operational teams should meet more regularly among themselves to ensure that all commitments made at call-ins are being followed through with (law enforcement promises, social service commitments, etc.).

These governing structures could be put in place either at the bureau or division level.

- Community moral voices

Selecting the right people to communicate the community moral message is crucial. In most cities, GVI proceeds by identifying and working with community members already committed to and engaged in violence prevention work and often closely engaged with group members. They may be any of the following: street outreach workers, workers in the prisoner reentry field, grassroots leaders in affected neighborhoods, faith leaders, community members whose loved ones have been killed, prominent local public figures, coaches, and local business people.

Representatives of the Working Group typically meet with a small number of community figures to brief them on the GVI model, explain its goals and record of accomplishment, answer any questions, and ask if they are willing to play a role in the project and who else might serve as a community moral voice. Working Group representatives should plan to hold several rounds of such meetings to build a cadre of local community members willing to be involved in this way. Once they are convinced of the strategy's utility, they are usually willing to speak at the call-in or support the work in other ways.

- Support & Outreach structure and commitment

Providing help to street group members is a critical part of GVI. The focus of this help should be on safety, removing barriers to success, addressing trauma, meeting individuals where they are through outreach efforts, and connecting the core street population to social services and support. To organize an effective support and outreach structure, the Working Group should complete the following five steps:

- Identify providers who can offer a variety of resources and prioritize individuals who come to them for support through GVI
- Meet with the providers to explain GVI and set expectations for a successful operational group focused on meeting the needs of those involved in violent groups
- Identify a lead provider (GRYD) to serve as the entry point for anyone interested in getting help which includes identifying a full time Support and Outreach Coordinator from that organization to answer the phone 24/7 and manage the initial intake and case management as well as the referral and tracking process. This individual should participate in the Working Group.
- Ensure fast response times so people can get the help they need when they need it.
- Develop and maintain a tracking database so the GVI partnership knows the outcome of the support that is being provided. The primary goal of the support and outreach structure is to keep engaged individuals safe and out of prison, so metrics should be tracked accordingly.

- Demonstration enforcement action

Prior to the first call-in in any jurisdiction or bureau, a demonstration enforcement action should be completed to show violent groups that future violence will be met with swift and certain consequences and that from now on, a partnership of local, state, and federal authorities will pay special attention to an entire group when a member commits a violent act. The demonstration enforcement action illustrates, in advance, the key enforcement message that the law enforcement speakers will deliver during the call-in. The following steps should be followed:

- Based on the data from the problem analysis, identify the most violent group in the jurisdiction
- Identify all members of that group
- Design an interagency enforcement plan with all local, state, and federal partners
- Conclude the investigation and enforcement action one to two weeks prior to the first call-in

Future call-ins should be organized around the completion of subsequent enforcement actions in response to the first group involved homicide after the call-in as well as the most violent group, as the call-in will use information about those actions to demonstrate the consequences of further violence.

- Call-in

All of the proceeding steps are necessary to get to the first call-in. The call-in is a communication mechanism; its primary purpose is to deliver the strategy's key messages clearly to the group members and, through them, back to the entire groups with which they are associated. During the call-in, the law enforcement-community partnership clearly communicates three points: 1) A community moral message against violence, 2) a credible law enforcement message about the consequences of further violence, and 3) a genuine offer of help for those who want it.

Law enforcement should aim to invite at least one person per group in the jurisdiction and should invite those who are on supervision to compel them to attend the call-in. The project manager/bureau coordinator will coordinate all other logistics: identifying a venue of civic importance, confirming and preparing speakers, scheduling a mandatory rehearsal before the call-in, and inviting law enforcement and community partners to attend.

- Post call-in

After the first call-in, the following operational steps should be taken and maintained.

- Custom notifications
  - Custom notifications are an additional communication mechanism intended to supplement the call-in messaging and prevent retaliation. These notifications are used to communicate the GVI message directly to individuals who may not be able to be compelled to attend a call-in as well as those involved in recent violence. Custom notifications often take place in the individual's home and the delivery team should be comprised of law enforcement, community, and support and outreach representatives.
- Tracking and follow through on the law enforcement and support and outreach commitments
  - After the first call-in, it is essential that the various commitments made are upheld. In order to do so, the Working Group needs tracking mechanisms in place to closely monitor the violence that follows the call-in to ensure the law enforcement partnership is following through on their group enforcement based promises. All shootings and homicides should be tracked and reviewed by the law enforcement operational group on weekly basis to determine group involvement. When the incident involves a group member as either the victim or the suspect this should be tallied in the group scorecard. This allows the team to determine the most violent group at any given time. Additionally, this review process allows the team to know when the first GMI homicide is committed which should immediately trigger a group based enforcement action.
  - Similarly, all support and outreach engagement should be tracked to make sure people are able to get the help they need.
- Regular Working Group and operational team meetings
  - The project manager should schedule monthly Working Group meetings to keep all partners engaged.
  - Each of the operational team meetings (law enforcement, support and outreach, and community moral voice) should occur on a regular basis; the frequency will likely vary by group.
- Regular group audits scheduled
  - The group audit process should be refreshed approximately every 6 months so that the law enforcement operational team is working with the most up to date group information at all times.

- Regular call-ins
  - Call-ins should be held approximately every 90 days and should occur only after a group enforcement action was completed in that jurisdiction. Call-ins can happen more frequently than every 90 days depending on the local violence dynamics.



**NATIONAL NETWORK FOR SAFE COMMUNITIES**

PRACTITIONERS CONFERENCE

June 22-23, 2015

**MONDAY, JUNE 22**

- 8:30 AM**      **Registration and breakfast**
- 9:00 AM**      **Welcoming Remarks**  
President Jeremy Travis
- 9:15 AM**      **Introduction to the National Network for Safe Communities**  
President Jeremy Travis
- 9:25 AM**      **Introduction of Keynote**  
President Jeremy Travis
- 9:30 AM**      **Keynote**  
Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs Karol Mason
- 10:00 AM**      **Plenary 1:      Reintroducing the National Network for Safe Communities**  
David Kennedy
- 11:30 AM**      **Plenary 2:      Police and Communities in Motion**  
Ed Copeland  
Garry McCarthy  
AC Roper
- Moderator:** President Jeremy Travis
- 1:00 PM**      **Lunch**
- 2:00 PM**      **Panel Option 1: The National Network's Interventions: Core Operating Principles**  
David Kennedy

**Panel Option 2: The Cost of Traditional Criminal Justice**

President Jeremy Travis  
Glenn Loury  
Heather Thompson  
Tim Dunn

**Panel Option 3: New Approaches to Strategic Law Enforcement**

Maurice Landrieu  
Alex Calenda  
Tate Chambers  
Caroline Keating McGlynn  
Susan Herman

**3:30 PM**

**Panel Option 1: Institutionalizing the Work of Building Safe Communities  
(Community & Law Enforcement)**

Jim Summey  
Mike Green  
Chief Bob Tracy  
Bob Wasserman

**Panel Option 2: The Social Science Record: Findings related to NNSC Interventions**

Robin Engel  
Andrew Papachristos  
Thomas Abt  
Mark Kleiman

**Panel Option 3: Integrated Street Work**

Todd Chamberlain  
Teny Gross  
Susan Lee  
Guillermo Cespedes

**5:00 PM**

**Welcome reception for all**

**NATIONAL NETWORK FOR SAFE COMMUNITIES  
PRACTITIONERS CONFERENCE  
June 22-23, 2015**

**TUESDAY JUNE 23**

**9:00 AM Registration and breakfast**

**9:30 AM Welcome remarks/Debrief of Day 1  
TBD**

**10:00 AM Plenary 1: National Network/Reconciliation National Initiative/Post**  
David Kennedy  
Tom Tyler  
Nancy LaVigne  
Tracie Keese  
Ed Chung  
Priscilla Hayner

**11:30 AM Panel Options 1 : Social Network Analysis**  
Andrew Papachristos

**Panel Options : New Areas of Promise: Prosecution, Corrections, Prisons**  
Chauncy Parker  
Ken Thompson  
Shrene Crawford  
Carly Kuhath

**Panel Options 3: Applying the Domestic Violence Intervention**  
Marty Sumner  
Stacy Sechrist  
Nadine Neufville  
Susan Herman  
David Kennedy

**1:00 PM Lunch**

**2:00 PM Panel Options 1: New Approaches to Support and Outreach**  
Deanna Hoskins  
Vaughn Crandall  
Risco Mention-Lewis  
Amy Crawford  
Paul Smith

**Panel Options 2: Applying Procedural Justice and Police Legitimacy**

Greg Berman

Daniel Gilbert

Ronal Serpas

**Panel Options 3: Custom Notifications**

Christopher Mallette

Larry Casterline

Fred Fletcher

Bob Tracey

**5:00 PM**

**Closing conversation**