Community Safety Leadership Academies
Empowering Leaders to Close America’s Safety Gap
THE CHALLENGE

American cities are in crisis. In 2020 we witnessed the largest nationwide rise in murders in 50 years. At least 12 major U.S. cities set homicide records. The result has been a widening of disparities in gun violence victimization over the last few years, with increasingly severe burdens on communities of color. For good reason, we spend a lot of time talking about widening income inequality in America. We spend much less time taking about widening inequality in something even more fundamental: safety.

It goes without saying that improving overall public safety and closing these safety gaps will require long-term, sustained investments to address ‘root causes’—improving education, reducing poverty, and eliminating segregation. But in the short-term, the day-to-day work of saving lives falls primarily to two sectors of front-line first responders that must shoulder the load: police and community violence intervention (CVI) organizations. Unfortunately, for different reasons, neither sector has been able to capitalize on advances in data-driven management practices that have transformed many other sectors, for example medicine and technology. As a result, neither has been able to deliver as much social good per dollar spent as our cities need.

THE OPPORTUNITY

In response, we have launched the University of Chicago Community Safety Leadership Academies (CSLA).

The CSLA offer first-of-their-kind programs to train the next generation of policing and CVI leaders from across America—with the goal of having national impact—and are being rigorously evaluated. This effort brings together data and behavioral science insights of top academics at one of the world’s leading research institutions along with our nation’s leading safety practitioners who have a demonstrated track record of real-world success. The Academies run simultaneously and with complementary curricula, focusing on the transformational impact leadership and management can have, aiming to be the most impactful public safety trainings ever offered in the United States.

The world is in the middle of a data-driven management revolution. The private sector has recognized there is enormous leverage in both incorporating data and technology into their operations and decision-making, and in investing in human capital development for managers and future leaders to be able to capitalize on these advances. This has even been true in parts of the public sector: the U.S. Department of Defense invests tens of millions of dollars a year to send its officers to get advanced degrees from the best universities in the country because they believe this will improve output from the department’s $700 billion per year total budget. And in education, the late Eli Broad recently donated $100 million to the Yale School of Management to establish a management academy for principals and school leaders to improve output from front-line teachers and staff.

This is very much not the case in policing or in CVI, which suggests that such a shift could produce far more and better (and fairer) outputs from existing police and CVI resources. For example, new research from the University of Chicago suggests that improved leadership can change violent crime rates and police use of force by as much as 35% or more. Unfortunately, because most police departments invest so little in developing their future managers and leaders, they are foregoing large potential improvements by operating as they did in the 1970s (or in some ways, as in the 1870s).

The data-driven management revolution has bypassed the CVI field for a very different set of reasons. The Biden Administration’s recent announcement of support for the CVI field of $5 billion represents the first time the federal government has made a significant investment in this sector.
The CSLA draws on the best data, behavioral science insights, and learnings from the field to offer curricula focused on bringing the leadership and management practices of policing and community violence interventions into the twenty-first century.
The Policing Leadership Academy

The Policing Leadership Academy is led by policing experts from around the country with a proven history of having radically transformed departments to increase public safety effectiveness and fairness. The program offers a multidisciplinary curriculum that spans six months. Students apply knowledge from the behavioral, organizational, and sociological sciences to become stronger leaders and advance effective evidence-based practices within their organizations. Students also complete a capstone project, developed in partnership with their department’s leadership, as part of the PLA curriculum.

We are optimistic about this approach because of evidence from two of our partner cities: Over the last 30 years in New York City, murder rates plummeted by 83% while incarceration declined simultaneously. In Los Angeles, murder rates dropped by 64% while community support for the police (as reported on surveys) fully doubled. Many criminologists attribute a sizable share of these gains to professionalization of these departments with better training, better management systems, better accountability, and data-driven decision making. But these agencies are outliers among the over 14,000 local police departments in the U.S. The Policing Academy at CSLA helps train police leaders from around the country on how to learn from and improve upon this success.

The University of Chicago Crime Lab has a long history of rigorous evaluation, and we bring that expertise to bear in assessing the impact of this effort to generate insights that can drive large-scale progress. To test the effectiveness of the Policing Leadership Academy, researchers at the Crime Lab and Cornell University Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy are conducting a multi-city, randomized controlled trial to measure the impact of investing in the leadership and management skills of police leaders on both community safety and the harms of policing. The CVI Leadership Academy curriculum is also being evaluated with the goal of elevating lessons learned to train CVI leaders at scale.

FUNDING

We are grateful to Ken Griffin and Michael Sacks who have provided generous seed funding to launch this initiative. Our goal is to provide training for free to the initial cohorts of participants (with outside philanthropic support) to generate ‘proof of concept’ evidence about the transformative impact of improving local front-line leadership capacity. Our hope is that such evidence would then eventually lead to federal government support to sustain this impact in perpetuity.

LEARN MORE

For more information about CSLA, please visit our website at crimelab.uchicago.edu/projects/community-safety-leadership-academies.

ENDNOTES

1. The CVI Leadership Academy’s Founding Steering Committee includes:
   - Shani Buggs, Ph.D., M.P.H, Assistant Professor with the Violence Prevention Research Program at the University of California Davis;
   - Dr. Antonio Cediel, Managing Director of Live Free USA;
   - Erica Ford, CEO and Founder of LIFE Camp;
   - Marcus McAllister, a national violence prevention expert;
   - Pastor Michael McBride, Executive Director of Live Free USA;
   - David Muhammad, Executive Director of the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform;
   - Oresa Napper-Williams, Executive Director of Not Another Child;
   - Anthony Smith, Executive Director of Cities United.