

THE SQUARE ONE PROJECT

REIMAGINE JUSTICE

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Reimagining Justice at Justice:

INVESTING IN COMMUNITIES AS CO-PRODUCERS OF PUBLIC SAFETY

Amy L. Solomon, Brent J. Cohen, and Betsy Pearl



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was released in collaboration with the Square One Project at the Columbia University Justice Lab.



The Square One Project is a multi-year narrative and culture change initiative focused on a foundational reevaluation of justice policy in this country – moving toward expanding opportunity, improving true public safety in local communities, and reducing reliance on punishment as a response to social problems that are often rooted in poverty, violence, and racial discrimination. Square One asks, if we set aside the traditional response to crime, and ask first whether other responses might be more effective – if we seek a new “square one” – how would criminal justice policy be different?

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Photo on cover: The OJP leadership team meets with graduates of the University of Chicago Crime Lab’s Community Violence Intervention Leadership Academy.

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Reimagining Justice at Justice: Investing in Communities as Co-Producers of Public Safety

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This report expands upon the [remarks](#) of Assistant Attorney General Amy L. Solomon at the Columbia University Justice Lab Square One Project convening, *Creating Community-Led Safety: What Does It Take?* on May 29, 2024.

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I. INTRODUCTION: HOW WE GOT HERE

The launch of the Square One Project in 2018 was a call to boldly reimagine safety and justice in the United States, challenging the field to consider what our response to crime might look like if we stepped back and began from “square one.” How would we reimagine justice if we had the chance?

It seemed an ideal time to explore such a bold question. A decade after the passage of the Second Chance Act, the nation was riding the tailwinds of bipartisan reform measures in Congress and in state houses across the country. Even more seemed possible. Square One seized the opportunity, encouraging a major shift in perspective, challenging the nation to conceive of a future in which our notions of safety and justice extend well beyond the criminal justice system.¹

On the heels of this call from Square One came a time of great upheaval in our country, marked by the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19 and by the once-in-a-generation demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd and too many others. The national conversation around racial justice and equity took on a new urgency and energy, building momentum for a community-centered, equity-forward approach to public safety. Local governments, philanthropies, and corporate leaders responded to the moment, making significant commitments to advancing racial justice and reducing reliance on justice system agencies as the sole arbiters of community safety.

This movement may have been grounded in values, but it’s also rooted in evidence. Researchers like Patrick Sharkey documented community-based organizations as a driving force behind the great crime decline of the 1990s and 2000s, finding a causal link: a stronger community infrastructure – in the form of nonprofits – translated into greater community safety.²

But in 2020 rising crime and serious disruptions to society coalesced to create a backlash to reform. And – shockingly quickly – the momentum for reform began to wane.

President Joe Biden took office in the midst of this moment, taking swift action to address the very real concerns of many Americans about violent crime, particularly gun violence, and about the fairness and equity of our systems. The President set the tone, making it clear that the choice between safe neighborhoods and equal justice was a false one. In his 2022 State of the Union address, he said, “Let’s not abandon our streets or choose between safety and equal justice.”³

Since the earliest days of the Biden-Harris Administration, the Department of Justice (DOJ) has embraced a commitment to advancing the twin goals of public safety and equal justice.

“We have faced a national public health emergency that put people out of work, closed schools, created pressures at home, limited social services, impacted criminal justice systems, and generally disrupted social activity. We have seen civil unrest as people question the legitimacy of our institutions and the role of law enforcement in society. We cannot be effective in guarding the safety of our communities without their confidence in police and policing. And we know that violent crime is not a problem that can be solved by law enforcement alone.”

– Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco
[Comprehensive Strategy for Reducing Violent Crime Memo](#)

Shortly after Attorney General Merrick Garland took office, the Department issued a comprehensive strategy for reducing violent crime, which included a focus on building community trust and investing in community-based prevention and intervention programs.⁴ It includes work to advance racial equity and expand access to federal resources in historically marginalized and underserved communities, the communities that are disproportionately affected by crime and violence.



VICTOR provides mediation, conflict resolution and case management, as well as job training, housing support and other services, to clients in Newport News, Virginia.

The Office of Justice Programs (OJP), the Department's largest grantmaking component, has sought to bring this vision to life, centering communities as essential partners. OJP has long supported state and local governments in their efforts to deliver safety and justice, particularly within the communities where violence and inequity have taken the greatest toll. Now, OJP is deepening its investments in communities themselves – in the organizations that reflect them, are designed to serve them, are located within them, and are closest to the problems we seek to solve.

Over the past three years, we have expanded the pool of resources available to community-based partners, and we have broken down barriers to ensure federal support is within greater reach. We have looked to the expertise of leaders with lived experience, and we have imbued our research with a focus on authentic engagement with the people impacted by violence, crime, and the justice system. In short, we are reimagining public safety from the OJP perch, using our levers of funding, technical assistance, and research to grow and support a healthy, sustainable community safety ecosystem.



From left to right: Metropolitan Peace Initiatives (MPI) Senior Field Manager Jesus Salazar, MPI Associate Director of Crisis Prevention & Response Unit Rodney Phillips, MPI Chief Training Officer Dr. Vanessa Perry-DeReef, Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Brent Cohen, OJP Senior Advisor for Community Violence Intervention Eddie Bocanegra, MPI Senior Field Manager of Field Operations Billy Deal, MPI Chief Policy Officer Kanu Iheukumere, and MPI Director of Field Instruction Steven Perkins meet for a site visit of MPI's Metropolitan Peace Academy Training and Wellness Center in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. MPI is a division of Metropolitan Family Services that partners with community-based and citywide organizations to help heal Chicago's communities experiencing the highest levels of gun violence. Courtesy of Metropolitan Peace Initiatives.

OJP'S PROGRAM OFFICES

The Office of Justice Programs is comprised of six program offices, led by Presidentially-appointed directors – with distinct areas of expertise, authorities, resources, and leadership. These offices work together in service of OJP's mission to advance community safety, build community trust and strengthen the community's role as co-producer of safety and justice.

BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE

BJA strengthens the nation's criminal justice system and helps America's state, local, and tribal jurisdictions reduce and prevent crime, reduce recidivism, and promote a fair and safe criminal justice system. BJA provides a wide range of resources to justice system and community-based partners to address chronic and emerging criminal justice challenges nationwide.

BJA is led by Director Karhlton F. Moore

BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS

BJS collects, analyzes, publishes and disseminates information on crime, individuals who commit crimes, crime victims and criminal justice operations. BJS also provides financial and technical support to state, local and tribal governments to improve their statistical capabilities and the quality and the utility of their criminal history records.

BJS is led by Acting Director Kevin M. Scott, Ph.D.

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

NIJ provides objective and independent knowledge and tools to inform the decision-making of the criminal and juvenile justice communities to reduce crime and advance justice, particularly at the state and local levels. NIJ accomplishes its mission through the "Listen, Learn, Inform" model — NIJ "listens" to the needs of the field; "learns" ways to meet those needs by funding research, development, and evaluation projects; and then "informs" the field of what we learned.

NIJ is led by Director Nancy La Vigne, Ph.D.

OFFICE OF JUVENILE JUSTICE & DELINQUENCY PREVENTION

OJJDP envisions a nation where all children are free from crime and violence. Youth contact with the justice system should be rare, fair, and beneficial. OJJDP:

- Provides national leadership, coordination, and resources to prevent and respond to youth delinquency and victimization
- Helps states, localities, and tribes develop effective and equitable juvenile justice systems that create safer communities and empower youth to lead productive lives

OJJDP is led by Administrator Liz Ryan

OFFICE FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME

OVC is committed to enhancing the nation's capacity to assist crime victims and to providing leadership in changing attitudes, policies, and practices to promote justice and healing for all victims of crime. OVC awards millions of dollars per year to support victim compensation and assistance, as well as discretionary programs and other efforts to enhance service providers' ability to support victims of crime. OVC is also the largest federal funder of anti-trafficking programs in the U.S.

OVC is led by Director Kristina Rose

OFFICE OF SEX OFFENDER SENTENCING, MONITORING, APPREHENDING, REGISTERING, AND TRACKING

SMART helps jurisdictions meet federal sex offender registration and notification standards. SMART supports states, tribes, principal U.S. territories, and local jurisdictions by:

- Supporting efforts to implement and maintain sex offender registration and notification systems
- Providing technical assistance
- Administering the National Sex Offender Public Website

SMART is led by Director Helena Heath

II. OJP'S NEW MISSION

In 2023, OJP released an updated [policy blueprint](#), an ambitious agenda that is both a statement of our values and a roadmap for the design and development of our policies and programs in the years to come. This blueprint is built around a basic premise — that communities are invaluable partners in realizing our collective goals of public safety and equal justice for all.

Community stakeholders have long been important partners (*see Sidebar: Looking Back: A Snapshot of OJP's Investment in Communities*), but OJP's core support has traditionally focused on public safety systems at the state, local, and Tribal levels.

Since its inception, OJP has made substantial and strategic investments in our criminal and juvenile justice systems — helping to make each part of those systems more fair, more effective, and more efficient in achieving greater safety and justice. This approach remains central, as focusing on systems change is the only way to scale innovation and reform.

LOOKING BACK: A SNAPSHOT OF OJP'S INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITIES

Although its resources have largely concentrated on criminal justice systems, OJP has long recognized the role of community in achieving safety and justice. Looking back to 2001, OJP's Bureau of Justice Assistance laid out a public safety framework for local government officials, which notes that “communities can no longer leave safety to only the criminal justice system” and highlights the value of “local partnerships with key actors — the police, government agencies, community organizations, and residents — to develop safe, secure, and vibrant communities.”⁶⁴

The Weed and Seed program, initiated in 1991 by then-President George Bush and administered by OJP, mobilized community- and faith-based organizations in partnership with law enforcement to address violent crime and support social and economic revitalization in scores of jurisdictions across the country.⁶⁵ Local Weed and Seed initiatives were profiled in a major Department of Justice report, *Promising Strategies to Reduce Gun Violence*, issued during the tenure of Attorney General Janet Reno.⁶⁶ The report highlighted a range of initiatives that enlisted community organizations in efforts to prevent and reduce firearm violence.

The responsibilities of the Executive Office of Weed and Seed were subsumed by OJP's Community Capacity Development Office in 2004. The new office, which also oversaw Tribal programs and reentry initiatives, was created to “help communities to better help themselves, enabling them to develop solutions to community safety problems confronting them, as well as developing the leadership to implement and sustain those solutions.”⁶⁷

Later initiatives, such as the Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation program and the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, continued OJP investments in comprehensive, community-based solutions to community and youth violence.⁶⁸

At the same time, the historic underinvestment in marginalized communities has exacerbated the effects of crime, violence, and victimization, leaving communities to create interventions, resources, and programs to curb violence and heal trauma, often without readily accessible avenues to public or private support.

With that in mind, we have laid out a new mission for OJP, framed around three overarching priorities: To provide resources, leadership, and solutions to advance community safety, build community trust, and strengthen the community's role as co-producer of safety and justice. These ideas are not new – and in fact, have been part of our work for decades. But over the years, the vast majority of OJP's resources have supported justice system actors, without a comparable investment in the capacity of community-based partners.

Now, with our new mission statement, we are reaffirming and reinforcing our commitment to building community capacity as a core component of the public safety infrastructure and complement to justice system actors in catalyzing meaningful and lasting change. In short, we are doubling down on our commitment to strengthening the community's role as co-producer of safety and justice.

What does it mean for the community to co-produce safety and justice? It means that community-based organizations and community members are instrumental partners in public safety efforts. It means that institutions with deep roots in the communities hardest hit by violence have a meaningful role in bringing the public safety agenda to life in the neighborhoods they serve. It means that these organizations receive the long-overdue recognition and resources they need to reach people most affected by violence and the justice system. And it means easing the outsized burden on police and other justice system professionals, allowing them to focus on their core duties as they work to reduce and resolve serious crime.

“[P]artnerships are this country's most powerful tool – and our best hope – to protect our communities from violent crime.”

– Attorney General Merrick B. Garland
[*Project Safe Neighborhoods Summit, 2022*](#)



Assistant Attorney General Amy L. Solomon, National Institute of Justice Director Nancy La Vigne, and OJP Senior Advisor for Community Violence Intervention Eddie Bocanegra visit UTEC, an OJP grantee that serves young adults in Lowell, Lawrence, and Haverhill, Massachusetts who are at highest risk of engaging in or being victimized by violence.

A. THE OUTSIZED BURDEN ON OUR JUSTICE SYSTEM

For too long, the monumental project of public safety has fallen primarily – or even solely – on the shoulders of the justice system. Of course, police, prosecutors, courts, and corrections are foundational pillars of public safety, with the authority and responsibility for managing key terms of the social contract. Yet the scope of their mandate and their power has grown in recent decades, as lack of sufficient investment and, in some cases, disinvestment in the social safety net has eroded other societal support structures.

Officers are routinely expected to respond to calls-for-service related to social issues, from substance use and mental health crises to nuisance complaints and quality-of-life concerns. While officers nationwide have demonstrated a profound commitment to stepping up and filling gaps to address acute needs in their communities, many are feeling the strain of these misplaced expectations. Today's law enforcement agencies are facing acute recruitment and retention challenges, leaving many departments understaffed and overworked.⁵ Officers are stretched exceedingly thin, putting officer safety and well-being at risk.

At the same time, social issues that are more appropriately addressed by non-law enforcement professionals are monopolizing police time and resources. While it's difficult to pinpoint the exact frequency of calls-for-service that concern social service needs, due to jurisdictional differences in the classification and collection of 911 call data, we know from law enforcement leaders themselves that such calls-for-service are both prevalent and resource-intensive.⁶ Behavioral health issues alone account for countless hours and countless dollars that law enforcement cannot spend on mission critical activities, like reducing and resolving violent crime.⁷ A survey of over 350 sheriffs' offices and police departments nationwide found that roughly 21% of law enforcement staff time and 10% of law enforcement budgets were spent responding to and transporting individuals with mental illness in 2017.⁸

Every day, officers across the country go above and beyond to address the needs of their community. Some receive training to learn how to effectively respond to individuals in crisis. Yet law enforcement is not set up to manage complex social service needs. Without the right tools at their fingertips, officers are often left with few options. As a result, people with acute social service needs are regularly arrested and booked into jail, a response that may not be appropriate or necessary and that can worsen outcomes in both the short- and long-term for these individuals and for the system overall.⁹ In fact, officers can unintentionally escalate a situation, as the mere presence of law enforcement can heighten distress for people in crisis.¹⁰ And too often, such interactions tragically end in excessive or fatal uses of police force.¹¹

Public perceptions of the justice system often hinge on the actions of its most visible representatives: law enforcement officers. When police respond with unnecessary arrest or use of force, it erodes community trust and undermines the legitimacy of the justice system – with serious consequences for public safety.

When residents stop trusting the system to work in their best interests, they may not seek assistance from the justice system if they are victimized, and instead may turn to illegal or unsafe means of resolving disputes or protecting themselves and their loved ones. Likewise, when residents don't view the justice system as a legitimate authority, they're less likely to comply with the law or report criminal incidents to the police. We see evidence of this in the wake of high-profile incidences of police violence that shake public confidence in law enforcement. Following the murder of George Floyd, for example, researchers documented a simultaneous rise in gun violence and decline in civilian reporting of gunfire across 13 major cities, amounting to a 50% drop in 911 calls for every shot fired.¹²

Public trust can also be make-or-break when it comes to solving serious crimes. Distrust in police deters the critical information exchange between community members and law enforcement in the wake of a crime, a factor that can contribute to low clearance rates for homicides.¹³ Low clearance rates for serious crimes can reinforce the perception that law enforcement does not adequately serve the community's most urgent needs, deepening distrust and increasing the risk that residents will rely on other means of protection or proxy for "justice" – including violence.¹⁴

"Law enforcement officers and agents today are called on to do more than ever. America's ongoing overdose crisis and the growing prevalence of mental health disorders are driving more and more people into contact with the justice system, putting additional strain on our public safety officers. Many communities are deploying models of response that pair law enforcement with behavioral health specialists...."

Another way to relieve the burden on police is to focus on community-based and community-led responses to violent crime. Research shows that by engaging with the community to develop violence reduction strategies, we can benefit from the expertise and relationships of residents and thus be more effective."

– Vanita Gupta, former Associate Attorney General
[NIJ Research Conference, 2023](#)



Assistant Attorney General Amy L. Solomon and OJP Deputy Chief of Staff Betsy Pearl visit the Circle of Brotherhood, a non-profit organization that provides youth development and mentorship, conflict mediation and resolution, and educational services in neighborhoods of Miami-Dade County.

B. THE CASE FOR COMMUNITIES AS CO-PRODUCERS OF SAFETY AND JUSTICE

There is a better way. By building out a more robust public safety infrastructure, one that embraces the strengths of both the justice system and community leaders and organizations, we can free up officers' time to focus on engaging the community and resolving serious crimes. We can bring in community-based organizations with the expertise and training to complement law enforcement, helping to address the underlying root causes of crime and inequity while at the same time rebuilding trust in the justice system.

Community is a critical counterpart to the justice system and a primary piece of the public safety puzzle. Community residents, as well as the neighborhood organizations that serve and support them, are essential to building protective factors against violence, building trust, building stronger neighborhoods, and building political will to sustain neighborhood safety efforts over the long term. Moreover, organizations that are firmly grounded in their community have both a deep understanding of the needs of their neighborhood and close ties to residents themselves, allowing them to effectively engage individuals that “mainstream” institutions struggle to reach. Residents may be unwilling to seek out or accept services from those mainstream providers when trust in public institutions is frayed, as is often the case in the communities most impacted by crime and the justice system.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) – and the people who lead them – are well-positioned to build and maintain community trust, even among those residents wary of systems and institutions. That credibility allows CBOs to reach residents that other service providers cannot. And with their first-hand understanding of residents' needs and experiences, CBOs are poised to deliver high-impact interventions tailored to the communities they serve. In short, CBOs are uniquely situated to meet the needs of individuals who too often fall through the cracks, making these organizations a particularly effective complement to justice system actors and other public-sector institutions.

Community has a role to play at every intercept point in public safety. To meet the needs of people in crisis, the public sector is teaming up with community-based service providers that can dispatch behavioral health clinicians and trained peer support specialists – either in partnership with officers or on their own – to deliver safer, more appropriate responses to mental health calls made to 911. To reduce arrests, incarceration and recidivism, diversion models are redirecting people toward community-based services that address underlying causes of their contact with the justice system. To interrupt patterns of violence, community violence intervention programs are deploying credible messengers to mediate conflicts and build pathways to healthier outcomes for those at highest risk of shooting or being shot. To break cycles of trauma and victimization, community providers are engaging with people hospitalized for violent injuries, delivering services that address underlying needs and facilitate connections to options for long-term healing and resilience. To deliver on the promise of a second chance, community-based reentry service providers are providing job training, greater educational and housing opportunities, and better access to healthcare for people returning to their communities from incarceration.

Taken together, the expansion of the community safety infrastructure holds significant potential to drive meaningful reductions in crime and violence. Drawing on more than 20 years of data from 264 cities, sociologist Patrick Sharkey found strong evidence of the causal impact of local nonprofits on violent crime rates between 1990 and 2012. In a city of 100,000 people during this time period, the addition of 10 new nonprofits focused on community safety and development led to a 9 percent reduction in homicide and a 6 percent reduction in overall violent crime rates. While the study focused on drivers of the great crime decline of the 1990s and 2000s, Sharkey concludes that the findings make a compelling case “for reconsidering the set of actors and organizations that have the greatest potential to build stronger urban communities and control violent crime in the years to come.”¹⁵

Another study of the impact of community-oriented nonprofits in New York reinforces the causal relationship between the growth of neighborhood organizations and reductions in crime and found that government funding is a key piece of the puzzle. An analysis of crime data and city discretionary funding patterns found that increased presence of and funding for community-based organizations contributed to tangible reductions in crime rates.¹⁶



OJP Assistant Attorney General Amy L. Solomon, Bureau of Justice Assistance Director Karhlton F. Moore, and OJP Senior Advisor for Community Violence Intervention Eddie Bocanegra meet with staff and participants in Roca, Inc.'s community violence intervention programming in Baltimore.

III. OJP MISSION IN ACTION

At OJP, our new mission is more than just a tagline. We are bringing our mission to life in every facet of our work, from setting our funding and research priorities to shaping practice and policies within our own agency. The new mission statement expresses an aspiration, not simply for a more effective justice system, but for stronger communities where safety and trust co-exist and are mutually reinforcing, and where community-based organizations are positioned as valued, co-equal partners in the public safety ecosystem.

Centering the community's role as co-producer of safety and justice allows us to widen the scope of possibilities. It allows us to shift and expand our concept of safety and our expectations for justice – from the mere absence of crime to the presence of greater opportunity.



VOICES, a program managed by Houston-based Civic Heart and funded by OJJDP, provides a range of services for girls involved or at risk of involvement with the justice system.

A. BRINGING COMMUNITY INTO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

OJP is operationalizing our mission within our own organization, bringing community voice to the decision-making table to shape federal policy and practice.

We are growing the ranks of experts with lived experience at OJP through visiting fellowships that provide an opportunity for leaders in the field to work hand-in-hand with the federal workforce to shape policy and practice. In 2021, we reinvigorated the Second Chance Fellowship, bringing experts with direct involvement with the criminal justice system to OJP.

The Second Chance Fellowship, part of the Bureau of Justice Assistance's (BJA's) Visiting Fellows Program, launched in 2016 when BJA brought on reentry expert and social justice advocate Daryl Atkinson to work with the Federal Interagency Reentry Council. Over the past three years, we've welcomed three policy professionals to serve as Second Chance Fellows at BJA, where their first-hand insights are helping to bring important new perspectives and innovative ideas to OJP programming and policymaking. The Fellows are developing strategies to reduce barriers to housing, improve access to education and Federal Pell Grants, and create a thriving, holistic reentry ecosystem. And in 2023, OJP brought aboard a fellow whose lived experience with substance use and the justice system will help inform BJA's efforts to reduce the stigma for people in recovery, enhance peer recovery supportive service initiatives, and address barriers to accessing treatment courts among underserved and historically marginalized populations.



From left to right: Second Chance Fellows John Bae and Angel Sanchez, Assistant Attorney General Amy L. Solomon, inaugural Second Chance Fellow Daryl Atkinson, and Second Chance Fellow Stanley Frankart.

We are also ensuring representation of impacted individuals, including youth, on the committees and panels that play a key role in advising our work. The [Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention](#), for example, is an independent body that was established by Congress in 1974 to coordinate federal programs and activities to better serve at-risk children and youth. The Coordinating Council, which is chaired by the Attorney General and vice-chaired by the Administrator of OJP's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), now includes several members who were impacted by the juvenile justice system in their youth and have dedicated their careers to improving outcomes for future generations of kids.

Young people are also serving as compensated consultants for OJJDP, advising community violence intervention programs, providing counsel in the development of toolkits and resources, and helping to organize national conferences. OJJDP now includes language in nearly every grant solicitation requiring prospective grantees to tell us how they are working with directly impacted youth and their families. And youth with lived experience are serving as peer reviewers as well, giving them a voice in the OJP grant selection process and the programming that can impact future generations.

Additionally, we have been intentional about bringing community voice and expertise into the federal ranks. OJP's Office of the Assistant Attorney General (OAAG) now includes a Senior Advisor for Community Violence Intervention (CVI), who comes to OJP directly from the CVI field. A true leader of the CVI movement, he brings an incredible wealth of experience and expertise to OJP, serving as both a driving force behind our approach to CVI and our own credible messenger to the communities we serve. In addition – and for the first time – OJP's OAAG has on board a Senior Counsel for Racial Justice & Equity, a survivor of violence with deep ties to community-based and culturally specific organizations throughout the country.

“Communities are an essential partner, an asset and a source of resources and ideas. Those who are closest to the problem are a critical part of solving the problem.”

– Attorney General Merrick B. Garland
[Gun Violence Prevention Remarks at the Rose Garden, 2021](#)

B. FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SOLUTIONS

To bring our mission to life, we are infusing the role of community throughout our \$5 billion annual grantmaking portfolio, which touches nearly every aspect of public safety and criminal justice. The initiatives described below are just a few examples of the ways in which our mission animates our funding strategy.

Community Based Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative

In Fiscal Year 2022, OJP launched the [Community-Based Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative](#) (CVIPI), a federal grant program tailored to community-led safety solutions that interrupt patterns of violence in the lives of the highest-risk individuals. Administered through a partnership between OJP's Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office for Victims of Crime, and National Institute of Justice, CVIPI represents an unparalleled federal commitment to community violence intervention (CVI) strategies. These strategies have been recognized as a vital complement to policing and a central pillar of the [Administration's Comprehensive Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gun Crime and Ensure Public Safety](#) and the [Department of Justice's Comprehensive Strategy for Reducing Violent Crime](#).

"We know that community safety and community trust are inextricably linked. The challenge of gun violence demands a collective solution, one that brings together community leaders and justice system actors around a shared vision of safer communities."

– Ben Mizer, Acting Associate Attorney General
[CVIPI Conference, 2024](#)



OJP Senior Advisor for Community Violence Intervention Eddie Bocanegra (left) with Jacquell Clemons Moore (second from left) and her team at the Interrupting Violence in Youth and Young Adults Project, part of the Grady Health System in Atlanta, Georgia

CVI strategies drive down violence by engaging the small subset of people who are most likely to participate in or be victimized by violent crime. Research and experience tell us that a significant portion of violence can be traced back to these small groups, who play an outsized role in driving violent crime in any given city. Reaching these actors is key to impacting violent crime, yet these individuals are overwhelmingly disconnected from societal institutions and are unlikely to seek out or receive the type of supportive services that could offer an off-ramp from violence. That's where CVI models come in. CVI programs

deploy outreach workers, sometimes known as credible messengers, whose personal history of overcoming violence and trauma lends them authority in the eyes of the people at the highest risk of committing acts of violence. With their credibility in the community, these trained professionals are uniquely positioned to de-escalate conflicts and avert shootings among the highest risk individuals, and to connect them to the supports and services they need to change the trajectory of their lives.



The OJP leadership team meets with graduates of the University of Chicago Crime Lab's Community Violence Intervention Leadership Academy.

In the two years since CVIPI's launch, we have invested some \$200 million in violence interventions with the power to save lives and change lives. CVIPI is funded in part by the landmark Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which included \$250 million over 5 years for CVI strategies. Community leaders have been pioneering CVI strategies for decades within their neighborhoods, and we have worked to ensure their vision shines through in our initiative. OJP's CVI investment strategy is squarely focused on building the community infrastructure to interrupt violence and create a lasting peace.

CVIPI is now making direct investments in nearly 80 CVI sites, spanning 29 states and territories. We're advancing safety in our country's largest cities – New York, Los Angeles, Chicago – and in smaller metro areas, like Flint and Rapid City, where the needs are just as great. We are delivering much-needed resources to CBOs and government-led collaboratives, helping to seed new programs and expand the reach of established models. We're offering hands-on training and technical assistance both to our grantees and organizations that are not currently receiving federal funding, doubling down on our commitment to ensure that every community has the tools they need to disrupt cycles of violence and victimization. We are also funding research and evaluation of violence intervention models, with an intentional focus on deepening the growing evidence base around CVI.

We are investing in CVI strategies through other funding streams, as well. Under the [Advancing Hospital-Based Victim Services Program](#), managed by our Office for Victims of Crime, we have invested nearly \$5 million since FY 2021 to support hospital-based violence intervention programs (HVIPs), a model that pairs hospitals with community-based organizations to address trauma, prevent retaliation, and support safety planning for victims in the immediate aftermath of violence. The HVIP model is based on an understanding that violent injury is a strong predictor of future violent victimization. Research finds that up to 45 percent of patients treated for a violent injury are reinjured within 5 years, a sobering data point that speaks to the need for interventions designed with this population in mind.¹⁷ HVIPs are filling this need by deploying credible messengers to engage with patients hospitalized for violent injuries, working to interrupt cycles of retaliation and harm and to facilitate connections to supportive services in the immediate and long-term. OJP's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is also supporting HVIPs tailored to young victims of violence, housed within children's hospitals in Chicago and Memphis, as part of their [Strategies to Support Children Exposed to Violence](#) grant program.

THE GROWING EVIDENCE BASE FOR CVI

Despite historical under-investment in research on CVI models, a growing number of studies point to the enormous potential that CVI strategies hold. In Sacramento, for example, an evaluation of a CVI model known as Advance Peace found statistically significant reductions in crime, concluding that the “intervention can reduce gun violence and help deliver healing supports to individuals largely ignored and criminalized by most urban institutions.”⁶⁹ Researchers credited the program with reducing gun violence by 18 percent city wide, and by up to 29 percent in one target neighborhood.⁷⁰

Likewise, an NIJ-funded study of the Cure Violence CVI model found statistically significant declines in actual and attempted shootings, ranging from 17 to 24 percent across four sites in Chicago.⁷¹ And researchers at John Jay College of Criminal Justice concluded that Cure Violence interventions were “associated with significant improvements in public safety” among target communities in the city of New York.⁷² Gun injuries fell by 50 percent in the city’s East New York neighborhood following the implementation of a CVI strategy, compared to a 5 percent reduction in a matched comparison area without such an intervention.⁷³ Notably, a survey of young men living in the neighborhood found that 84% of knew at least one employee of the community group implementing the CVI model, while more than half of respondents recognized every single member of the staff.⁷⁴

A randomized control trial of READI, a Chicago-based CVI model, also yielded promising results. Across participants, READI reduced shooting and homicide arrests by 65 percent, although the impact falls just outside traditional statistical significance cutoffs. But one sub-group showed large and decisive reductions in violence: participants who were referred to READI by outreach workers. READI reduced shooting and homicide arrests by nearly 80% among this group and drove down firearm victimizations by 43%.⁷⁵

NIJ is further building out the evidence base around CVI through our Community Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative, funding evaluations of CVI strategies in Boston, New York, New Orleans, Greensboro, North Carolina, and beyond.

Connect and Protect

For over 15 years, OJP's Bureau of Justice Assistance has supported the Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Program, delivering funding for cross-system collaborations to better serve the needs of individuals with mental illnesses or co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders who come into contact with the justice system.¹⁸ Building on this work, in Fiscal Year 2021, BJA launched [Connect and Protect](#), a grant program specifically focused on supporting the community's role in addressing a key area of need: police responses to people with behavioral health disorders. Over the past three years, BJA has invested over \$50 million in law enforcement and behavioral health agencies working together to improve first responses to people experiencing mental health or co-occurring mental health and substance use crises.

BJA is helping law enforcement leaders nationwide confront the challenges associated with responding to people in crisis, whose complex social service needs often demand the specialized expertise of trained healthcare professionals. In recognition of these challenges, law enforcement leaders are increasingly embracing the role of community-based institutions in addressing calls-for-service related to behavioral health needs. With funding from OJP, 100 communities in 37 states are implementing strategies such as



The Denver STAR program dispatches medics and clinicians to resolve calls-for-service related to behavioral health or social service needs that do not require police response.

co-responder teams, which pair officers with mental health professionals to respond to incidents involving individuals experiencing behavioral health crises.¹⁹ With their specialized training, these healthcare professionals are equipped to de-escalate crises and connect individuals to community-based services to address the underlying causes of their contact with law enforcement. Co-responder teams may include peer support specialists who leverage their professional training and personal experience with behavioral health conditions to connect with and support people in crisis.²⁰ Not only do such co-responder models avert unnecessary arrests in the immediate term, they also expand pathways to treatment and recovery services that promote long-term recovery and well-being for the individual – preventing future calls-for-service related to behavioral health needs.

Denver, Colorado has been a leader in the movement to build a robust continuum of services for addressing behavioral health needs, helping to ensure that every call-for-service receives the right type of response. In fact, Denver is among the agencies selected to serve as a model for other agencies as part of BJA's [Law Enforcement–Mental Health Learning Site](#) program. This initiative facilitates peer-to-peer exchanges for public safety personnel to learn directly from pioneering agencies like Denver that have adopted innovative and effective responses to people with behavioral health needs. Established in 2016, Denver's co-responder program partners Denver law enforcement officers with mental health professionals from a local community-based service provider, WellPower, to deliver more effective and appropriate responses to residents in crisis.²¹ In 2020, Denver further expanded its public safety continuum with the launch of the Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) Program, a community responder model that dispatches teams of medics and WellPower clinicians to resolve calls-for-service related to behavioral health or social service needs that do not require police presence.²² STAR has also initiated a partnership with Servicios de la Raza, a community-based service provider, to connect clients to culturally responsive wraparound services in the community.²³ Notably, the city's contract with Servicios de la Raza empowered the organization to take the lead in identifying areas of greatest need, and forge partnerships with grassroots organizations best-positioned to fill those gaps.²⁴

While more rigorous research is needed to determine the degree to which co-responder models achieve their intended impacts, some studies have yielded promising results across a number of key outcomes, including enhancing crisis de-escalation, increasing connections to behavioral health services, and reducing pressure on the justice and healthcare systems.²⁵ To help fill gaps in the evidence base, NIJ has put out a call for rigorous research proposals to evaluate the effectiveness of models that employ non-sworn first responders in partnership with, or as an alternative to, police response or enforcement.²⁶

In qualitative assessments, individuals served by co-responder teams have affirmed the benefits of this approach, noting the value of the team's specialized expertise and assistance in accessing community-based services.²⁷ Police officers have also spoken to the advantages of co-responder models. A study of a Boston-based co-responder model, funded by BJA, noted that officers viewed the program as a useful tool in their day-to-day work, viewing clinicians as a helpful resource in responding to low-level crimes and calls for service.²⁸ Others expressed appreciation for the different skillset that clinicians brought to the table. As one officer noted, "Clinicians have de-escalation skills and can put people at ease."²⁹

Former STAR Operations Manager, Carleigh Sailon, spoke to the value of expanding Denver's continuum of first response in an interview with OJP's [Justice Today](#) podcast. Sailon emphasized the additional benefits of the co-responder model to officers themselves, who face immense stress and trauma every day on the job, yet may struggle to access support. "Having so much exposure to the clinicians destigmatized mental health in a lot of ways to officers," Sailon said, explaining that officers began opening up to their clinician partners about difficult situations in their own lives. "I think pairing those officers and clinicians together in the car, really having us work as a big team, helped the officers have more direct access to behavioral health clinician that they knew very well and trusted."³⁰

Partnerships with behavioral health professionals and individuals with lived experience offer an opportunity to not only improve the quality of responses to people in crisis, but also to strengthen police-community trust and reinforce legitimacy. Sailon took note of this impact in Denver, noting that when co-responders or the STAR team showed up on the scene, “the community really felt like their needs had been met, like Denver cared enough about what was going on to ensure that the appropriate responders showed up to that call.”³¹

Reimagining Justice

In 2022, the Bureau of Justice Assistance launched a new grant program to serve as an incubator for innovative community-based approaches to addressing less serious crimes. Called [Reimagining Justice](#), the program is designed to support cross-sector community partnerships, working in coordination with law enforcement, with the goal of devising more effective responses to low-level safety issues and reducing unnecessary justice system involvement.

We made our first award under Reimagining Justice to the Newark Public Safety Collaborative (NPSC), a network formed in 2018 that brings together a diverse network of 45 community-based organizations, state and local governments, law enforcement agencies, healthcare providers, businesses, philanthropies, researchers, and other Newark-based partners.³² Led by Rutgers University, NPSC is focused on making data analytics more accessible to local community leaders and change agents, ultimately mobilizing community resources and empowering community organizations to co-produce public safety.³³ With a \$3 million investment from BJA, NPSC is now piloting a community engagement strategy in five neighborhoods hardest hit by violent crime, with the goal of designing community-driven and data-informed solutions to public safety concerns.³⁴ Through a series of regular meetings with local partners and neighborhood organizations, NPSC delivers data and analytics that shed light on when and where crime is concentrating, and community participants share insights from their lived experience that help paint a clearer picture of the nature and drivers of crime. These inputs come together to guide the development of community-driven solutions to specific public safety challenges, which NPSC operationalizes through partnerships with community-based organizations.

“For too long, we have placed entrenched social problems at the feet of police, expecting them to do more than they can or should with the limited tools of arrest and incarceration. But we know, and all of you know, that we need to adjust our lens, to zoom out and take in the bigger picture. If we think of public safety as only the purview of the “criminal justice” system, we miss out on so many possible supports and solutions for those in need....

The idea behind Reimagining Justice is to test new community safety strategies that complement traditional enforcement and that may help better address community needs. Our goal here is to enlist and empower community stakeholders in solving public safety problems.”

– Vanita Gupta, former Associate Attorney General
[Safety and Justice Challenge Convening, 2022](#)

To understand what NPSC's approach can look like in action, take the example of the bodega. NPSC's data revealed that gun violence was concentrated around bodegas, a finding that community partners validated through their personal experiences in the neighborhood. From there, community groups talked to both residents and bodega owners to better understand the nature of the issue. What they learned was that bodegas had become a de facto meeting place, as they were among the only businesses in the area. NPSC ultimately worked with the local utility company to offer bodega owners a new, low-cost solution. For \$20, the company would install flood lights in front of their bodega, creating an environmental deterrent to crime. And through a partnership with the city government, bodegas began to stock fresh produce, a strategy that helps to both enrich access to healthy food and increase foot traffic in the area.

Building on this inaugural award, BJA's Reimagining Justice program has since expanded its reach to cities such as Greenville, South Carolina, where grant funds are seeding a new safety model tailored to and driven by the needs of members of the city's Nicholtown community.³⁵ In Austin, Texas, *Reimagining Justice* is supporting a partnership of Black-led institutions, helmed by the nonprofit Urban Alchemy, as they develop and assess a model for building community safety and resilience in the city's historically underserved Central East Austin neighborhood.³⁶ And in Oregon's Multnomah County, *Reimagining Justice* is investing in a community safety collaborative that brings together local government and law enforcement agencies, the Native American Youth and Family Center, and neighborhood providers and residents to pilot community-driven solutions for addressing low-level offenses.³⁷

Enhancing School Capacity to Address Youth Violence

In FY 2022, OJP's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention launched [*Enhancing School Capacity to Address Youth Violence*](#), a new grant program dedicated to building cross-sector solutions to safety concerns in and around K-12 schools. Over the past two years, OJJDP has invested more than \$45 million to support networks of community-based organizations, working directly with local schools to expand the availability of supportive resources for students at risk of engaging in violence. OJJDP's resources are seeding cross-sector collaboratives in 24 states, serving kids from St. Paul to Shreveport, Los Angeles to Louisville, and beyond. Grantees are delivering intensive case management to meet students' underlying needs and address risk factors for violence, drawing on the breadth of prevention and intervention services available across their network of community-based partners and service providers.

In Chelsea, Massachusetts, for example, Roca is partnering with Chelsea Public Schools to deliver intensive interventions for youth at the highest risk for engaging in or being victimized by violence, using a service model grounded in the tenets of cognitive behavioral therapy to help address trauma and promote healthier decision-making.³⁸ Roca is working with CPS staff to integrate these tools and services across their operations, building schoolwide capacity to address trauma and prevent violence. Roca and their partners also serve as a bridge between families and schools, facilitating connections to supportive services to help ensure that young people have the support they need to embrace positive behavioral change for the long-term. And in New York, OJJDP is supporting a school safety partnership convened by the Kings Against Violence Initiative (KAVI), a Black-led nonprofit organization serving under-resourced communities in Central Brooklyn.³⁹ KAVI is collaborating with four local public high schools and a network of community-based organizations, service providers, and an evaluation partner to reduce youth violence and strengthen ties between schools and families.



Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Administrator Liz Ryan (right) meets with youth leaders from the Six Points Innovation Center in Richmond, Virginia.

Building Local Continuums of Care to Support Youth Success

In FY 2023, OJJDP awarded more than \$17 million dollars in funding to 26 grantees — including 6 states, 17 local jurisdictions, and 3 training and technical assistance providers to support local continuums of care to support youth success. These planning grants will allow states, counties, and cities to partner with directly impacted youth, their families, and communities to engage in a community asset mapping process to identify their assets, assess their needs, and identify gaps in programs and services.

The [Continuum of Care](#) framework supports a network of services and opportunities to foster positive youth development and prioritizes community safety and effective program outcomes. This investment leverages decades of evidence-based learning to prevent youth from entering or deepening their involvement in the juvenile justice system and steer them on a path to success. At its core, the continuum of care approach is community-driven, leverages local insights, and addresses youth needs through mentoring, after-school programs and other prosocial activities.

The Continuum of Care framework aims to help young people access needed resources and services where they live and at every point in the juvenile justice system. It takes a holistic approach, spanning prevention, intervention, treatment, and reentry strategies. The framework emphasizes prevention and early intervention services for the vast majority of young people, supporting those at risk for both delinquency and victimization. For young people at high risk of moving deeper into the juvenile justice system, the framework emphasizes intensive, targeted, evidence-based programming. The goal is to prevent most young people from ever entering the juvenile justice system, and to help those who become system-involved to find positive paths for the future, reserving out-of-home placement for the few youth who pose a serious risk to public safety.

C. MICROGRANT APPROACH

We know that CBOs with deep ties to the community are often in the best position to deliver high-impact interventions. We also know that these same organizations are often under-resourced and may lack the tools to apply for and administer federal grants, limiting their ability to scale lifesaving interventions. To help bridge the gap to federal resources, we are investing in intermediary organizations that are providing both funding and technical assistance to grassroots CBOs, with the goal of building their capacity to grow and sustain their work for the long term. In the past three years, OJP has embraced this intermediary approach as a vehicle for both promoting more equitable access to our resources and for tapping into the enormous wealth of expertise that these grassroots CBOs bring to the work.

Community Based Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative

Through CVIPI, for example, we are funding seven intermediary organizations to deliver microgrants and hands-on support to smaller CVI service providers on the frontlines of violence in their communities. CVIPI intermediaries are reaching grassroots organizations across the country, building capacity to prevent violence in neighborhoods from Alabama to Memphis, Cincinnati to Colorado.

One of the intermediaries, Metropolitan Family Services, is delivering OJP resources to hyper-local CBOs that serve neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side. Among the microgrant recipients is Project H.O.O.D., a grassroots organization that had struggled to fully implement its violence intervention services, due to budgetary constraints. With the infusion of resources from OJP, Project H.O.O.D. can now hire additional violence intervention staff and expand service coverage within Chicago's Woodlawn community. The microgrant has also allowed Project H.O.O.D. to further solidify their partnership with University of Chicago Medical Center, providing continued funding for their victim advocate to support hospital-based intervention strategies. Another microgrant is supporting Think Outside Da Block, a violence intervention provider serving the nearby Englewood community of Chicago. While Think Outside Da Block has periodically faced funding lapses or delays that disrupt its ability to serve its clients, OJP funding will enable the organization to operate without interruption. The program will also allow Think Outside Da Block to build capacity to access and analyze data, helping the organization better understand the patterns and drivers of violence within its service area.

"[C]ommunity organizations have developed innovative approaches to intervening in the lives of those at the highest risk of engaging in or becoming victims of violence. Experience and research have shown, moreover, that prevention and intervention can be highly effective complements to the strategic enforcement of criminal laws. Although these kinds of programs are almost always best coordinated by local community and government partners, the Department can play a significant role in supporting them through grant funding, training, and technical assistance."

– Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco
[*Comprehensive Strategy for Reducing Violent Crime Memo*](#)

Second Chance Act Community-Based Reentry Incubator Initiative

OJP is also deploying the intermediary approach through the [*Second Chance Act Community-Based Reentry Incubator Initiative*](#), a program launched in 2023 to grow the capacity of small community- and faith-based reentry service providers. In the initiative's first year, OJP invested \$8 million in two intermediary organizations that are now delivering microgrants and intensive support to help grassroots organizations scale up services to meet the needs of people returning home from incarceration. Microgrants are paired with training and technical assistance to equip community-based organizations to apply for and manage grant funding in the future, opening doors to long-term sustainability. One of OJP's inaugural Reentry Incubator Initiative recipients is the Latino Coalition for Community Leadership (LCCL), an intermediary organization specifically focused on finding, funding, forming, and featuring grassroots and non-profit organizations in marginalized communities. LCCL has a history of success in building the capacity of smaller nonprofit organizations. Community and faith-based nonprofit organizations that have engaged with the LCCL's full community-facing intermediary model experienced a 400%-500% increase in their organizational budget size over the first five years, according to LCCL Executive Director Richard Morales.

LCCL is deploying OJP resources to identify and support small organizations that serve individuals returning from incarceration to both rural and urban communities of California, Colorado, and Oregon.⁴⁰ Specifically, LCCL's efforts will concentrate on reentry organizations with less than 10 full-time paid staff and/or total assets of less than \$500,000, in an effort to prioritize support for organizations that will derive the most benefit from capacity-building assistance. LCCL is also prioritizing organizations led by staff with lived and/or shared experiences with the criminal justice system and the community they serve, in recognition of the immense value and expertise that impacted leaders bring to the reentry space.

Trauma Recovery Centers

OJP is expanding our use of the intermediary model through new programs like the [*Trauma Recovery Center Demonstration Project*](#), a recently-announced funding opportunity from OJP's Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) dedicated to seeding and supporting trauma recovery centers in those areas hardest hit by crime, violence, and victimization. The trauma recovery center (TRC) model is an approach to victim service provision intentionally designed to reach and meet the needs of crime survivors from underserved communities. TRCs engage in active outreach to victims of crime, offering a one-stop-shop for a wide range of individualized services designed to create stability in the aftermath of a traumatic incident and promote long term healing and recovery.⁴¹

"We know that survivors are more likely to seek services from organizations that are familiar with their culture, language, and background."

– Attorney General Merrick Garland
[*National Crime Victims' Service Awards Ceremony, 2022*](#)



Brenda Glass, founder and CEO of the Brenda Glass Multipurpose Trauma Recovery Center in Cleveland, Ohio, speaks during the 2024 National Crime Victims' Service Awards Ceremony.

Through other funding streams, OVC has provided ad hoc support to TRCs such as the Brenda Glass Multipurpose Trauma Recovery Center (BGMTRC), based in Cleveland, Ohio. Like other TRCs, the BGMTRC doesn't take a "business as usual" approach to victim services. Instead, they offer services that are designed by and specifically for underserved victims of violence. Like many of the BGMTRC's clients, Glass is herself a survivor of violence and the justice system from the community she serves – a shared background that helps build connections and trust with clients, whose needs and circumstances she understands first-hand.⁴² In addition to providing counseling and therapy, the BGMTRC helps clients find transitional and temporary housing, connects them with peer support networks, accompanies them to court proceedings, offers transportation to medical appointments, supplies basic necessities like groceries or medications, and provides ongoing individualized support and counseling along their healing journey.

BGMTRC has accessed OJP resources through a partnership with Cleveland Peacemakers Alliance, a grant recipient under CVIPI.⁴³ Yet few TRCs are currently receiving federal grants. As advocates have noted, TRCs face barriers to funding under existing federal grant programs, whose narrower eligibility criteria and programmatic requirements may not align with the multidisciplinary TRC model.⁴⁴ Moreover, like other community-based service providers, TRCs may struggle with the burdens of applying for and managing federal grants. These barriers have contributed to significant funding concerns among TRCs, threatening their ability to scale and sustain much-needed services. A recent survey found that one in three TRCs had to cut back on services in 2022 due to financial shortages, while over 90 percent expressed some degree of concern that funding constraints would force them to limit service provision in the future.⁴⁵ OVC's new grant program will help bridge this gap by investing in a training and technical assistance provider that will select three communities to implement the TRC model, with an infusion of OJP funds and support. With the launch of this new program, we hope to bring both resources and recognition to this community-driven model for serving victims of crime and breaking cycles of trauma and victimization.

D. EQUITABLE ACCESS TO RESOURCES

On his first day in office, President Biden signed Executive Order 13985, entitled [*Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government*](#), calling on federal agencies to identify barriers that underserved communities and individuals may face in accessing federal benefits and opportunities, and to “allocate resources to address the historic failure to invest sufficiently, justly, and equally in underserved communities.”⁴⁶ Building on E.O. 13985, DOJ released its first ever Department-wide [*Equity Action Plan*](#) in 2022, prioritizing efforts to “encourage grantees to include equity considerations in the provision of federally funded services” and to improve “access to funding opportunities for organizations that are led by, or primarily serve, historically marginalized and underserved populations.”⁴⁷ OJP is now bringing the Equity Action Plan to life across our grantmaking portfolio.

Equity Priority Considerations

Starting in FY 2022, OJP incorporated into many of our competitive solicitations a priority consideration for applicants that demonstrate that they bring enhanced capacities and capabilities to their proposal based on their status as a population-specific organization. We’ve also incorporated a priority consideration for proposals designed to promote equity and remove barriers to access and opportunity for communities that have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by inequality. In the FY 2023 grant season, nearly 1 in 10 applicants submitted proposals aligned with our equity priority considerations, the vast majority of which received funding.

OJP has also redoubled our efforts to build awareness of funding opportunities, engaging in targeted outreach efforts that have significantly expanded the pool of applicants for our resources. In FY 2023, one-third of all proposals for competitive grants came from organizations that had not recently applied for an OJP grant or had never before submitted an application, including more than 900 new nonprofits that submitted applications for resources.

VOCA Compensation Guidelines

OJP’s Office for Victims of Crime oversees the federal victim compensation program, which supports states’ efforts to provide direct reimbursement to, or on behalf of, crime victims for a wide variety of crime-related expenses, such as medical costs, counseling, lost wages, and funeral and burial costs. The implementation guidelines for the program, which was first authorized by the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) of 1984, have not been updated since 2001. Over the past two decades, OVC has received considerable feedback from state officials, crime survivors, advocates, and other stakeholders, who have shared the barriers that victims face in accessing compensation, especially victims from historically marginalized and underserved communities.

Two years ago, OVC began the process of revising the regulations that govern the crime victim compensation program to eliminate subjectivity, increase fairness, and clarify eligibility for reimbursement – especially among communities most impacted by violence.⁴⁸

In February 2024, OVC released proposed revisions to the regulations for public comment.⁴⁹ Among other changes, the proposed regulations would prohibit states from denying compensation claims based on an individual's criminal history. The proposal is a step towards dismantling the false dichotomy between people who are victimized by crime and those who engage in it, a harmful misperception that prevents too many individuals from accessing the support they need to heal and propels the cycle of violence and victimization.

OVC aims to have these guidelines in place before the end of this year, affirming the reality that justice-involved individuals are too often victims of crime themselves – and that they are just as deserving of support and healing as anyone else.



OJP grantee UTEC provides street outreach, workforce development, education and mental health services, and other support to young adults in Lowell, Massachusetts, and surrounding communities.

E. TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Training and technical assistance is a key piece of OJP’s menu of support for partners at the state, local, and Tribal levels. OJP supports training and technical assistance opportunities that provide both our grantees and the field at large with access to specialized expertise and hands-on support across a wide range of safety and justice issues. As our direct investments in community have grown, OJP is also expanding the availability of TTA designed to strengthen the community’s role as co-producer of safety and justice.

This year, we put out a call for proposals to launch a new TTA hub that will serve as a dedicated resource for community-based organizations that serve communities disproportionately impacted by crime, violence, and victimization.⁵⁰ The selected TTA provider will deliver hands-on support to these organizations, helping them build the administrative, financial, and programmatic capacity they need to manage federal resources and to serve as enduring partners in safety and justice solutions.



Youth from Indigenous communities in Alaska, Arizona, Oklahoma, Texas and Washington take part in the Tribal Youth Resource Center Young Leaders program, an OJJDP initiative designed to bring lived experience to policymaking and program development.

OJP is also supporting TTA designed to help systems actors more effectively and authentically partner with community as a co-producer of safety and justice. A key example comes from OJJDP's work to support the implementation of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) [Title II Formula Grants Program](#), which provides funding to states to carry out prevention and intervention efforts and juvenile justice system improvements. By statute, state grant recipients are required to convene a State Advisory Group (SAG), a governor-appointed body that provides policy direction, shapes programmatic goals, and oversees the administration of JJDP funding.⁵¹ SAGs are required to include youth members, including members impacted by the juvenile justice system, but meaningful engagement of young people is still a common challenge. To address this gap, OJJDP launched the provision of intensive TTA for SAGs to facilitate successful partnerships with young people, helping to ensure that state juvenile justice policies reflect the perspectives of those closest to the issues at hand.

OJP is also infusing our TTA services with the expertise of individuals who have had first-hand experience with the justice system. OJJDP has selected three youths with lived experience in the juvenile justice system for a paid fellowship with the [Youth Reentry Technical Assistance Center](#), where they will bring critical insight to the development of resources and policies for improving reentry outcomes for system-involved youth. Fellows will shape and support TTA for OJJDP grantees, helping to ensure that interventions are grounded in and responsive to the needs of the young people that they are intended to serve. The fellowship offers the opportunity to enhance the quality of support for current grantees, while at the same time providing invaluable professional experience and development to the next generation of training and technical assistance providers. OJJDP is now seeking to build on this approach as part of efforts to strengthen outcomes for American Indian/Alaska Native youth. In FY 2024, OJJDP released a call for applications for a TTA provider to deliver comprehensive, culturally relevant support for initiatives focused on Tribal youth.⁵² To guide these efforts, the provider will select young people with lived experience in the Tribal youth justice system to participate in a Tribal Youth Fellowship Program. These fellows will actively participate in all aspects of the provider's effort, helping to ensure that TTA is grounded in and focused on the experiences and perspectives of young people within Tribal juvenile justice systems.

F. STREAMLINING THE GRANTS APPLICATION PROCESS

Applying for a federal grant can be a complex and labor-intensive process, particularly for smaller organizations or those without experience navigating federal grant processes. Working within federal regulations and guidelines, OJP is streamlining the application process to dismantle barriers to funding for organizations that might otherwise face challenges accessing federal resources.

The OJP solicitation template serves as the foundation for all OJP funding opportunities and includes the standard components of the information an applicant needs to provide. In 2023, OJP analyzed applicant feedback and thought creatively about how to rework the solicitation template in order to remove barriers and increase access for organizations that may be unfamiliar with applying for OJP funding. We simplified instructions, removed redundant content, and “translated” jargon-y text into plain English where possible. In January 2024, OJP established a working group with DOJ’s Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) and Office on Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) dedicated to identifying and implementing strategies to further streamline the grantmaking process, with a special focus on reducing the barriers for Tribal applicants.

Reducing barriers to funding for Tribes has long been a priority for DOJ. DOJ launched the Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation (CTAS) in FY 2010, in direct response to concerns from Tribal leaders that existing grantmaking processes were too burdensome and insufficiently flexible to meet Tribal needs.⁵³ CTAS consolidated multiple Tribal grant opportunities under one solicitation, allowing Tribes to submit a single application for funding under various programs.



Marcus McAllister, a training and technical assistance partner of the Lake County State’s Attorney’s Office, addresses the media at the announcement of the Gun Violence Prevention Initiative, an OJP-funded effort focused on interrupting violence among high-risk young people in Lake County, Illinois.

OJP has continued to refine its efforts to break down barriers to accessing funding for Tribal communities. Since FY 2018, OVC has administered the [Tribal Victim Services Set-Aside](#) (TVSSA) program, which provides support to Tribal communities to enhance services for victims of crime.⁵⁴ OVC has regularly incorporated feedback from Tribal leaders into the TVSSA program structure, including by implementing a formula for disbursing TVSSA awards to ease burden on applicants, and by creating flexibility for applicants to select the length of their project period to better meet their communities' needs. In FY 2022, OVC took additional steps to eliminate barriers to resources for Tribal communities by allowing Tribes to apply for resources either by submitting a traditional project narrative, completing a streamlined project checklist, or simply by having a conversation with an OVC staff person who then documents project plans for the application.⁵⁵ With these options, Tribes can complete the bulk of their application through a simplified checklist or an oral interview, opening doors for applicants who may lack the time, familiarity, capacity or resources to write a formal grant proposal. In FY 2023, 65 Tribes completed virtual interviews to apply for funds, and OVC staff traveled to multiple locations in Alaska to conduct in-person interviews with an additional 25 applicants.⁵⁶

OJP is now piloting this approach in other solicitations as well. In FY 2024, OVC will provide alternative options for providing a project narrative beyond the traditional written proposal for their [Addressing the Basic Needs of Crime Survivors in Underserved Communities Program](#), a grant designed to provide underserved victims with essentials such as clothing, food, transportation, housing, and other resources critical for their well-being, healing, and safety. For this solicitation, applicants can elect to provide an oral presentation to OVC staff on their proposal, answer a questionnaire, or submit a video describing their project to OVC. The goal is to minimize the burden of the application process and expand access to federal resources to organizations directly serving underserved communities. The field will see significant and expanded efforts to streamline funding opportunities in FY 2025.

G. RESEARCH

OJP has adopted an orientation toward community inclusion in its scientific investments, as well. In recent years, the National Institute of Justice has increasingly prioritized and supported a slate of inclusive and participatory research projects, with a focus on ensuring that research grantees are intentional about engaging with people who are closest to the issues under study.

Community partners should be foundational and actively engaged in every element of community safety planning and intervention, including the data analysis, performance measurement, and evaluation processes related to those interventions. For example, NIJ recently funded the Urban Institute – in partnership with the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, and the California Partnership for Safe Communities – to establish a center to enhance research capacity among community violence intervention grantees and their research partners. The center will provide training in inclusive research processes and guidance on how to build local capacity for analysis and assessment and ensure that the evidence generated through research partnerships benefits the community.

Inclusive research employs interdisciplinary teams and includes both quantitative and qualitative inquiries. Its strategy of broader community involvement and wider application of methodologies opens the door for translating evidence into actionable information that can promote community safety on the ground.

Many communities experiencing the most acute public safety challenges are also those that have been historically under-resourced and yet over-researched. The history of research in these communities – largely communities of color – can be best characterized as research *on* communities rather than research *with* communities. Authentic inclusive research is key to rebuilding trust with communities that may be skeptical about scientific methods based on past exploitative practices. These strategies help to ensure that research findings will benefit the communities the evidence is intended to serve.

For example, an NIJ-funded study focused on identifying and understanding the violent victimization experiences of young Black men brought in people who had had such experiences to lead focus groups, conduct interviews, and engage in data analysis. This approach improves the quality and applicability of the research and promotes shared learning and mutually beneficial outcomes.

A related priority for NIJ is to ensure that the research it funds is approached through a racial equity lens. Researchers identify and aim to mitigate biases in both research questions and the data and methodologies employed to answer them. NIJ is also supporting Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) applying for research grants. NIJ recently awarded a cooperative agreement to John Jay College of Criminal Justice to establish a Center for Enhancing Research Capacity at MSIs. The Center will provide training and technical assistance to MSIs to build capacity to conduct research and apply for grants for criminal justice research across a wide array of topics, including community-led safety initiatives.



Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Administrator Liz Ryan and Office for Victims of Crime Director Kristina Rose engage in a panel discussion with Romeo Gonzalez and Shimaine Holley, whose personal experiences of justice system involvement, trauma, and healing are featured in the documentary, "JUVENILE: FIVE STORIES."

IV. LOOKING AHEAD: A CALL TO ACTION

Over the past three years, the Office of Justice Programs has embraced its mission to strengthen the community's role as co-producer of safety and justice, harnessing our strengths as a funder, a convener, and a bridge-builder to fortify community infrastructure as a complement to our systems of justice.

Yet federal resources are not enough. OJP investments across all sectors of funding amount to about \$5 billion a year. By comparison, state and local governments spend more than \$250 billion each year on their justice systems, more than \$120 billion of which goes to policing, \$80 billion to corrections, and \$49 billion to courts and the legal system.⁵⁷ The investments we are making at the federal level – even the unprecedented level of commitment to programs like the Community Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative – cannot come close to matching the magnitude of these public outlays.

What would it look like if community-based organizations and services were sufficiently resourced and prioritized as essential to public safety? Imagine neighborhood hubs staffed with professionals trained to break cycles of violence and heal trauma – not just one or two programs serving an entire city, but embedded in all the neighborhoods where there is need. Or crisis response systems where behavioral health specialists were on hand to respond to every 911 or 988 call where there was an underlying mental health or substance use issue. Or one-stop shops that offer job training, placement, mentoring, and education – on demand and accessible to anyone returning from prison, jail or juvenile facilities. Or victim services available to all survivors, including those who have not been traditionally recognized as “victims” and have been denied support and assistance as a result.

Every sector, every stakeholder, every segment of society has a role to play in realizing this vision.

State and local officials can embed community safety solutions within the fabric of their governments, providing both the resources and infrastructure necessary to sustain such models over the long-term. Already, our counterparts in state capitols and city halls are establishing offices dedicated to community safety and using their budgetary tools to make meaningful investments in the work. In Louisville, Kentucky, the city budgeted over \$9 million in FY2022–23 for its Office for Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods, providing critical support for restorative justice and youth violence prevention programming, hospital- and community-based violence intervention models, and other public health approaches to addressing violence.⁵⁸ In Oakland, California, voters approved a ballot measure in 2004 that instituted new parking and property parcel taxes that generate upwards of \$25 million in annual revenue dedicated to the city's public safety services – including a requirement to fund both law enforcement and a suite of community-based violence prevention programs.⁵⁹ These funds account for roughly half of the Oakland Department of Violence Prevention's anticipated \$22 million budget in FY2024, which is rounded out with resources from the city's general fund.⁶⁰ In Illinois, the state established a dedicated Office of Firearm Violence Prevention in 2021, making an initial investment of \$250 million over three years in community-based violence intervention strategies.⁶¹ More states and cities are stepping up to develop Offices of Violence Prevention, yet so much more is needed to bring resources to scale nationwide.

Our partners in the criminal justice system can use their voice and authority to champion the community's role in the public safety infrastructure. While it may seem counter-intuitive, law enforcement and justice system leaders are uniquely well-positioned to advance a new vision for safety and justice, in recognition of the fact that they cannot and should not carry the weight of responsibility alone. A framework of "shared safety"⁶² holds the promise of lifting a heavy burden – an unfair burden – from the shoulders of law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, courts, and corrections systems. It's an opportunity for these professionals to focus on the jobs that they signed up for, were trained for, and are urgently need for. It offers new avenues to build community trust, laying the groundwork for higher clearance rates, improved officer wellness, and ultimately safer neighborhoods for all.

Our philanthropic partners can deploy their flexible funding sources to seed innovation and drive change in ways that public dollars cannot, helping to shape the narrative and to change hearts and minds. Researchers can embrace inclusive and participatory practices that are building the evidence base for community-driven solutions and adding value to the communities closest to the issues under study. And CBOs can seize the opportunities at hand to grow, scale, and evaluate their efforts on behalf of the communities they serve.

We've seen encouraging signs of where we could be headed, giving us a glimpse of a reimagined future for safety and justice. It's an ambitious vision, and while we have a long way to go, it is within our collective reach. Square One challenged the field to "spark transformational thinking about what we can expect for our communities and our justice system."⁶³ At OJP, we are using the levers we have at hand to invest in and support the role of community as co-producer of safety and justice. Let us broaden our coalition to expand and strengthen the community ecosystem so that it is a central and lasting part of our public safety infrastructure.



The Freedom House Mobile Crisis Response Team is one of the community partners working with the Circle of Brotherhood, a community-based organization and OJP grantee working to reduce violence in Miami.

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