

Community Responses to Gun Violence in our Cities: Chicago Responds

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Chairwoman Bass, Ranking Member Ratcliffe, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the gun violence facing communities across our nation and to share the actions of Heartland Alliance¹ and other organizations, advocates, and survivors of violence in Chicago who are working around the clock to make our communities safer.

Communities across our country are struggling with violence--cities like Baltimore, Detroit, St. Louis, and Chicago². Much of this violence is concentrated in a handful of impoverished neighborhoods. This year alone, Chicago has had over 2,000 shootings and is nearing 300 homicides as a result of gun violence.³ Just this past weekend, 21 people were wounded and 5 people were killed.

Behind every shooting there is a family left to grapple with the aftermath. Mothers like Ms. Jennigs whose son was shot 19 times, or Rodney Bell who was shot in the face multiple times. I had the honor of knowing these young men, and I personally witnessed their efforts to change the circumstances they were born into. These killings and resulting trauma are *preventable*.

Neighborhoods with high levels of violence routinely face other compounding survival issues—like limited or no access to employment, safe housing, health and mental health services, and more. This results in a heartbreaking cycle of poverty, violence, and trauma.

And we know that exposure to violence and trauma can make people react in unpredictable ways that may not be appropriate to the situation. Much of the gun violence in Chicago, for example, is the result of split-second decisions, by traumatized individuals who have grown up surrounded by violence.

I know this from personal experience: I witnessed violence and domestic abuse at home when I was 6 years old. By the time I was 13, I witnessed my first homicide. I was 17 when my friend died in front of me. By the time I was 18, I was sentenced to 29 years in prison for murder.

In prison, I saw that most people looked exactly like me. The men who rotated through what seemed like a revolving prison door shared the same goal as me—to never return. Somehow, many of us fell short. Nearly everyone who returned to prison lacked the same things—a plan for how to survive outside of prison; a network of people who would stick by them when they faced setbacks; and access to a support system to help them cope with feelings of hopelessness, loss, and frustration.

Since my release from prison nearly 11 years ago, I have earned a Bachelor's from Northeastern Illinois University and a Master's degree from the University of Chicago. I've created innovative

¹ Heartland Alliance works in communities in the U.S. and globally to serve those who are homeless, living in poverty, or seeking safety. We believe society is better for everyone when all of us can participate, prosper, and reach our full potential. www.heartlandalliance.org.

² Over the last three years, gun violence in Chicago has outpaced other cities of our size. According to federal data that's available; there were over 14,000 gun homicides, primarily in urban communities.

³ Homicides due to gun violence in Chicago as of 9/18/19: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-chicago-homicides-data-tracker-htmlstory.html>

approaches to leveraging marginalized groups as part of the solutions, such as U.S veterans, parents who lost children to violence and people with justice involvement. My perspective on this is deeply informed by my personal experiences and education.

I am proud to be part of a movement in Chicago that aims to dramatically reduce the cycle of poverty and violence in our city.

The surge in gun violence in Chicago two years ago spurred action in unprecedented ways. A coalition of more than 40 Chicago funders and foundations—under the umbrella of the Partnership for Safe and Peaceful Communities—courageously aligned their funding to support proven and promising programs and approaches to reducing gun violence, rebuilding communities, and developing leaders who can sustain safety and opportunities.⁴

There are a number of promising initiatives that can serve as models, including:

- The Metropolitan Peace Academy, led by Communities Partnering for Peace, which was established to professionalize street outreach work.⁵
- Chicago CRED⁶.
- Chicago Public Schools Safe Passage which is designed to provide safe routes for students while traveling to and from school.⁷
- And READI Chicago, the program I run. With our six partners, we relentlessly engage men who are most highly impacted by gun violence, and connect them with paid employment, cognitive behavioral therapy, and support services.⁸ READI Chicago is being evaluated by the University of Chicago Urban Labs so that we can learn all that we can about what it takes to meaningfully identify and engage men who are at highest risk of gun violence—and keep them alive.

There are no federal programs designed to support bold, comprehensive responses to prevent violence like ours. Importantly, very few programs are led by people like me with life experiences like mine. We urgently need attention to and sustained investment in people who are the most at-risk before more lives are lost. I want to close by sharing a story of one of those lost lives.

When I first met Davon, he was unhappy with his life and community. He joined our program, and I started to see a change. He was beginning to plan for his future. Tragically, Davon was shot and killed walking home—from READI Chicago at 5:45pm on a sunny Tuesday afternoon earlier this summer. He was walking home just one block away from his normal route. It is an unimaginable loss. And I can't help but think about the young man who ran up to Davon and shot him. What if HE had been given the tools to help him pause and think? What if he had been surrounded by people who cared enough to help him address his pain or grievances and change his thoughts? Perhaps Davon would still be alive.

⁴ <https://safeandpeaceful.org/>

⁵ <https://www.metrofamily.org/cp4p/>

⁶ <https://www.chicagocred.org>

⁷ <https://cps.edu/Pages/safepassage.aspx>

⁸ For more information on READI-Chicago please visit: <https://www.heartlandalliance.org/readi/>. Importantly, in its first two years of implementation, READI Chicago has demonstrated the ability to identify, engage, and serve those who are most at risk of becoming involved in gun violence. We are serving over 1000 of these men: 87% are 18-32 years old, 93% are African-American, and 78% have lost a family member to gun violence. And they tell us it is working: "The program has changed my life. It works on my thinking. If I can get up to do negative, I can get up to do positive."



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After spending much of my time in prison contemplating how my future would have meaning, my goal is clear—to use my experiences as a former gang member and inmate, as well as my formal education, to save lives, and to help others with backgrounds like mine find and achieve their own dreams for a safer and better future.

We CAN do this, and you can help make this possible.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear today. I would be happy to respond to questions.