



# Building Public Safety Anchor Institutions: Lessons from the White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention

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# Introduction

Every day, gun violence leaves communities grieving and searching for solutions. From mass shootings that shock the nation to the daily toll on vulnerable communities where the risk of gun violence is high, the impact is devastating and extends to nearly every corner of the United States. Government leaders addressing this public health crisis must do more than respond after the fact—they must act strategically to prevent harm and support communities before violence strikes.

In 2023 and 2024, the nation saw homicides decrease by more than 25 percent, along with record-breaking reductions in gun violence.<sup>1</sup> These notable drops coincided with historic investments in prevention, transformative policy changes, and a new government approach grounded in public health strategies.<sup>2</sup>

The question is no longer *whether* a new approach to public safety is needed, but *how* to build and sustain it. As the role of the federal government shifts during the second Trump administration, states will need to build systems that prevent violence, address its root causes, and help communities thrive. Yet, for too long, public safety responsibilities have fallen mainly to law enforcement, leaving human services and community organizations underused—despite their ability to address the underlying drivers of violence.

A “whole-of-government” approach—a strategy that brings together multiple agencies to coordinate efforts—changes this dynamic. It treats safety as a shared responsibility and requires active coordination to be effective. Public safety anchor institutions (PSAIs)—cabinet-level agencies that manage non-enforcement-based safety strategies—are central to this approach. They ensure that safety is sustained, accountable, and rooted in community well-being. PSAIs can oversee community violence intervention,

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alternative first response, and services for crime survivors, making safety proactive rather than reactive.

Although a PSAI's priorities will vary by jurisdiction, gun violence prevention offers a unifying focus. Gun violence reflects multiple system failures, affects nearly every community, and exposes the limits of fragmented government responses. A coordinated, whole-of-government approach can address immediate safety concerns while building long-term infrastructure to reduce violence.

This brief draws on lessons learned during the co-authors' tenure as deputy directors of the White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention (WHOGVP), which can inform the design and implementation of state-level PSAIs. By leveraging the full capacity of government to protect the public, WHOGVP offers a roadmap for transforming public safety governance to be more accountable and effective.

# Lessons from the White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention

WHOGVP shows how coordinated federal action can prevent gun violence, support survivors, and align resources, offering a model for states to build PSAIs that support safety.

## **CREATION, PURPOSE, AND STRUCTURE**

WHOGVP marked a historic step forward in public safety strategy. Created in September 2023, the office was the first federal effort to treat gun violence as a whole-of-government challenge. It also centralized the government's response under one coordinating body. This shift complemented increased gun industry regulation and law enforcement's role in solving shootings and stopping gun trafficking.

It strengthened a broader, public health approach to prevention, intervention, and recovery. WHOGVP oversaw this entire portfolio.

The office accelerated the Biden administration's work to create safer communities. The single largest recorded annual increase in homicides occurred in 2020.<sup>3</sup> The administration took historic action to reverse that trend by committing to evidence-informed policies to reduce gun violence. This effort involved providing state and local governments billions of dollars through the American Rescue Plan Act; taking more than 50 executive actions on topics ranging from community violence intervention, gun trafficking, and safe storage; and in 2022, passing the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA)—the first major gun safety law in nearly 30 years.<sup>4</sup>

President Biden gave WHOGVP a clear mandate to coordinate federal efforts to reduce all forms of gun violence through four key tasks:

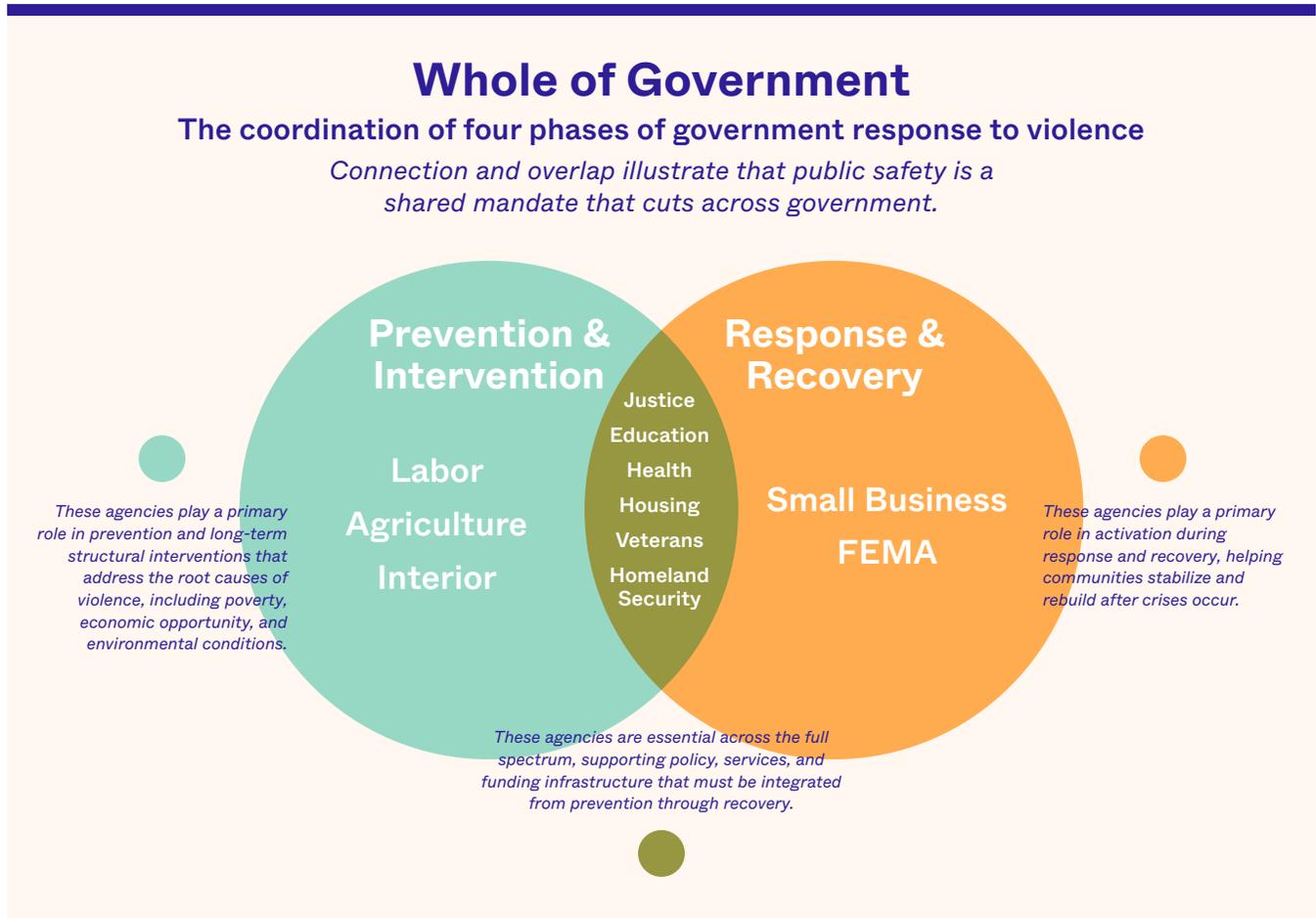
1. Implement the BSCA and prior executive actions.
2. Identify and coordinate new executive actions across federal agencies.
3. Build strategic partnerships with state and local governments to advance safety.
4. Improve federal support for communities impacted by violence, including creating a first-of-its-kind emergency response system for mass shootings and surges in violence.

The approach bolstered law enforcement's important role with new actions to reduce gun violence. WHOGVP enlisted every agency in this new federal approach to gun violence prevention.

To lead this work, the president appointed a high-level team with coordinating authority. WHOGVP included a director with the rank of assistant to the president, two deputy directors with the rank of special assistants to the president, and a policy coordinator.

Vice President Kamala Harris oversaw the office, reinforcing its strategic importance. The staff brought deep experience in government, policy, and organizing and lived experience as survivors of gun violence. This intentional staffing grounded the work in both institutional power and compassion.

From the outset, WHOGVP operated not as a standalone body but as a coordinating force across the entire federal government. Its scope included all forms of gun violence: firearm homicides and nonfatal shootings, suicides, mass shootings, intimate partner violence, and unintentional shootings. Its tools included executive authority, interagency convening power, and policy alignment, all channeled into one central aim: to reduce gun violence through a whole-of-government approach.



## SUBSTANTIVE WORK OF WHOGVP

During WHOGVP's tenure, the administration took more than 50 executive actions, fully implemented the BSCA, built an emergency response protocol, and invested nearly \$42 billion in community violence intervention, crisis intervention, and mental and behavioral health infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> Much of the work fell into three main areas: policy implementation, education, and service delivery, outlined below.

### 1. Policy implementation

The office had to develop innovative ways to maximize the benefits of existing laws and grant programs. WHOGVP prioritized implementing the BSCA.<sup>6</sup> The law introduced critical new measures, including the following:

- › establishing the first federal law targeting gun trafficking and straw purchasing (illegally buying a firearm for another person);<sup>7</sup>
- › strengthening the law on the unlicensed selling of firearms (the leading source of illegally trafficked firearms);<sup>8</sup>
- › prohibiting people convicted of misdemeanor intimate partner violence crimes from owning firearms;<sup>9</sup>
- › enhancing background checks for people younger than 21 years old;<sup>10</sup> and
- › allocating \$15 billion in new resources for mental health, state crisis intervention and red flag law implementation, school safety, the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, background checks, and community violence intervention.<sup>11</sup>

The office led a cross-agency audit to develop clear goals and deliverables for each section of the BSCA. Within two years, federal agencies, states, territories, schools, and other community institutions fully implemented the law. To illustrate how the law contributed to reducing all forms of gun violence, the office published a detailed implementation report.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond BSCA, the office supported more than 50 executive actions.<sup>13</sup> These ranged from cracking down on ghost guns and machine gun conversion devices to increasing federal agency accountability and data transparency.<sup>14</sup> WHOGVP worked across the federal government to develop a wide array of policy actions and access points for new and existing resources, including violence prevention and intervention, victim services, and trauma recovery centers.<sup>15</sup>

## **CASE STUDY: UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR—YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AS A VIOLENCE PREVENTION STRATEGY**

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, youth disconnection from employment and school rose sharply in 2020–21, and the country simultaneously experienced elevated levels of gun violence, especially among children and teens.<sup>16</sup> Traditional public safety systems were not designed to meet the scale of need, particularly the lack of meaningful economic opportunities for young people in communities with high rates of violence and poverty.<sup>17</sup>

Recognizing this gap, WHOGVP identified youth employment as one of the federal government’s most powerful but underused tools for preventing violence. Multiple cities that have invested in summer youth employment have seen associated reductions in crime.<sup>18</sup>

In 2024, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), in partnership with WHOGVP, announced \$45 million in new funding to expand youth employment opportunities for young adults ages 15–24 in communities most affected by violence, crime, and poverty.<sup>19</sup> The grants were administered through DOL’s Reentry Employment Opportunities program as part of its Youth Employment Works strategy. The initiative aimed to ensure there was “no wrong door” for young people seeking workforce development opportunities or supportive services.

Instead of positioning this investment as a standalone workforce initiative, WHOGVP and DOL framed it as part of a broader, coordinated prevention strategy, aligning labor policy with public safety goals. This collaboration exemplified how leveraging agencies or sectors beyond those traditionally responsible for public safety—in this case labor and workforce—could bolster violence prevention.

## **CASE STUDY: CENTER FOR MEDICAID AND MEDICARE SERVICE—USING MEDICAID TO REIMBURSE COMMUNITY VIOLENCE INTERVENTION AND SAFE FIREARM STORAGE COUNSELING**

By 2023, firearm injuries had been the leading cause of death for children in the United States for four consecutive years.<sup>20</sup> Communities with the highest rates of gun violence also face chronic divestment and limited access to health care, behavioral health services, and social services.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, community violence intervention (CVI) organizations, hospital-based violence intervention programs (HVIPs), and pediatric clinicians have long faced fiscal precariousness.<sup>22</sup>

The WHOGVP responded to a core structural challenge practitioners and advocates had long flagged: though gun violence is a public health issue, health financing systems had not formally recognized it. Medicaid, one of the largest public insurers in the country, was an untapped lever and resource. In September 2024, the Biden–Harris administration announced a major executive action clarifying that state Medicaid programs can reimburse for CVI services, HVIPs, and counseling on secure firearm storage. The federal executive action represented a historic acknowledgment that preventing violence is a public health function that depends on financial sustainability.<sup>23</sup>

Although critics may be concerned that Medicaid is an already burdened health care system and this only added to its plate, a 2020 analysis estimated that firearm injuries generated \$493.2 billion in total economic costs, including \$78 billion related to youth injuries alone.<sup>24</sup> Medicaid bears a disproportionate share of these costs. Redirecting Medicaid resources to prevention saves both lives and taxpayer dollars.

These policies and directives were not just symbolic. They resulted in material changes in communities across the country. In 2024, the U.S. Department of Labor awarded more than \$140 million in grants to improve job opportunities for people in communities impacted by gun violence.<sup>25</sup> Informed by the WHOGVP Safer States Agenda, at least 17 states enacted new legislation spanning safe storage (California), victim compensation (Maryland), ghost guns (Vermont), background checks (Maine), and permits (Delaware).<sup>26</sup> In 2023, the United States saw an 11.6 percent decrease in homicides—and another 14.9 percent reduction in 2024.<sup>27</sup>

**In 2023, the United States saw an 11.6 percent decrease in homicides—and another 14.9 percent reduction in 2024.**

## **2. Internal and external education and engagement**

Effective implementation required more than action; it required alignment. WHOGVP recognized that success depended on having partners within and outside the government. From the start, the office treated education and engagement as core functions, not afterthoughts. WHOGVP brought these internal and external stakeholders together around a shared mission: treating public safety as a public health issue. It emphasized the role each group could play in prevention, intervention, response, and recovery and in shaping federal funding opportunities.

Internally, WHOGVP had limited personnel and budget. Creating buy-in across the White House and federal agencies maximized its effectiveness. Staff met with the Domestic Policy Council,

National Security Council, Gender Policy Council, Communications, Intergovernmental Affairs, the Office of Legislative Affairs, and the Office of Public Engagement to explain the public health approach and opportunities for agency-specific contributions. Designated and empowered point people in each agency took ownership over their parts of the solution. The office also prioritized coordinating interagency meetings with clear deliverables. These convenings set a tone of shared accountability while strengthening strategic relationships. Purposeful convening normalized cross-agency collaboration to build capacity for faster decision-making across bureaucratic lines.

Externally, WHOGVP regularly engaged across sectors. It was in touch with health care leaders and workers, researchers, community violence intervention leaders, advocates, survivors of gun violence, and even influencers—from actors to athletes. Partners included state and local offices of violence prevention and other government officials, state legislators, school leaders, and law enforcement. Engagement was key to understanding the needs of constituents and building a more robust ecosystem. It helped federal leaders develop sound and responsive policies grounded in local realities.

Strategic communications were vital to the office's success. Using regular community briefings, earned media hits, social media, and direct stakeholder engagement—both at the White House and in local communities—the office helped ensure that funding opportunities were understood and accessible. For example, the office convened faculty with mental health expertise from 14 Historically Black Colleges and Universities to explore how to access federal grants that could support school-based mental health staff as part of a \$1 billion investment in this workforce, which the second Trump administration has since canceled.<sup>28</sup>

Through its internal and external engagements, WHOGVP played a critical role in deploying billions of dollars to communities. This investment set the stage for the office to transform how government services are coordinated.

### 3. Service delivery

From its earliest days, WHOGVP treated service delivery as a strategic priority. Responding to gun violence was and is a matter of logistics, coordination, and survivor care. With this in mind, the office created systems to align federal resources, strengthen victim services, and ensure rapid, trauma-informed response after violence occurs. The infrastructure the office developed should serve as a blueprint for states and cities as they develop their own PSAIs.

One of the office's first actions was to take an inventory of all existing federal resources and staff that could be mobilized in the aftermath of large-scale violence. WHOGVP identified hundreds of federal staff and more than \$17 billion in existing resources that could be used for mass casualty events and began systematically coordinating and deploying them to support families, law enforcement, communities, and local governments in the wake of high-profile violence.<sup>29</sup> The office also established the Gun Violence Emergency Response System (GVERS).<sup>30</sup> GVERS met weekly to coordinate deployments and protocols for resource delivery and to participate in listening sessions with communities impacted by gun violence to identify opportunities for improvement.

The direct feedback loop between service delivery and policy implementation made WHOGVP's approach not only faster but smarter. GVERS was not just reactive; it built muscle memory within federal agencies and defined a standard that did not previously exist for post-violence response focused on future prevention and healing.

In addition to emergency response, the office focused on expanding resources available to victims and survivors of gun violence. WHOGVP partnered with the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Victims of Crime to restore the depleted Crime Victims Fund created by the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA).<sup>31</sup> It streamlined eligibility requirements to empower community organizations and service providers to access resources. The Office of Victims of Crime also issued a public notice with proposed reforms that would ease access.<sup>32</sup> This document was particularly instructive for states

where VOCA administration often remains underused or overly bureaucratic.

For state and local governments, WHOGVP's model demonstrates that both policy implementation and service delivery depend on coordination. Although the model must be adapted to other levels of government, the following actions make whole-of-government coordination effective:

- 1.** Establish a centralized structure—a PSAI—to inventory and deploy resources during times of crisis.
- 2.** Build clear protocols that span agencies and can be activated immediately.
- 3.** Invest in survivor support infrastructure and ensure that funding mechanisms like VOCA are accessible to community-based providers.
- 4.** Create a feedback loop between service delivery teams and policymakers so approaches can be improved based on frontline experience and data.

By positioning service delivery as a strategic function, WHOGVP helped restore credibility to the federal government's role in violence response. States and cities can do the same by building permanent infrastructure to support communities not just during crises but also through proactive interventions and services.

## CASE STUDY: EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN LEWISTON, MAINE

In its first months, WHOGVP demonstrated how coordinated federal action can support communities in crisis. After tragic mass shootings in Lewiston, Maine, claimed 18 lives and wounded 13, Deputy Director Gregory Jackson deployed resources within hours to assist Maine’s governor and meet the community’s immediate needs.<sup>a</sup>

Jackson mobilized staff from 10 federal agencies, deploying more than 30 personnel on the ground and sending more than \$5 million in emergency funds for law enforcement, burial services, grief counseling, and survivor support.<sup>33</sup> In the days that followed, Jackson met with families, assisted local businesses, and helped set up a Community Resiliency Center that would serve the community for the next two years.<sup>34</sup>

Normally, such resources would take weeks to arrive—but WHOGVP acted in just days. The office also coordinated a visit from President Biden and Dr. Jill Biden during which they met directly with every affected person. WHOGVP’s response in Lewiston shows that rapid coordination and a people-centered approach can make public safety response both immediate and compassionate.

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<sup>a</sup> Steve Mistler, Kevin Miller, Patty Wight, et al., “18 Confirmed Dead, 13 Injured in Lewiston Mass Shootings as Manhunt Continues,” *Maine Public*, October 26, 2023, <https://perma.cc/HSQ2-544A>; and “Deputy Director of Gun Violence Prevention Office Talks About Response to Lewiston Mass Shootings,” *WGME*, November 10, 2023, <https://wgme.com/news/local/deputy-director-of-gun-violence-prevention-office-talks-about-response-to-lewiston-mass-shootings-gun-violence-schemengees-bar-and-grille-sparetime-recreation-just-in-time-recreation-greg-jackson-white-house>.

# Translating Federal Lessons into State Action

Gun violence leaves lasting scars on families and communities. Even as homicides decline, the underlying drivers of violence remain. The lessons learned at the federal level can aid cities, counties, and states as they continue whole-of-government efforts to make communities safer.

## STATE GOVERNMENTS MUST ENABLE LOCAL SUCCESS

State leadership and resources can help local governments align safety priorities across sectors. Without state alignment and infrastructure, even the most promising local innovations must navigate a patchwork of unpredictable funding, ad hoc partnerships, and siloed structures. The role of the state is not to directly manage a local whole-of-government approach to public safety but to create the conditions for it to thrive.

As of 2024, more than a quarter of states had a state-level Office of Gun Violence Prevention.<sup>35</sup> These offices coordinate statewide efforts, implement safety initiatives, and improve access to resources. They vary in size, budget, and authority, but they all have untapped opportunities for greater leadership, coordination, and defining impact.<sup>36</sup>

State-level PSAIs can be newly created or existing agencies equipped to take on this role. Regardless of structure, they can learn from the experience of WHOGVP and existing state-level offices to perform the following ongoing functions.<sup>37</sup>

- 1. Establish clear executive authority and leadership for the PSAI.** Governors and their senior leadership teams must formally designate public safety as a whole-of-government priority and authorize the PSAI to lead this

work. This requires issuing an executive directive or statutory mandate that clearly defines the PSAI's role, appointing a cabinet-level official with the authority to coordinate across agencies, and setting explicit expectations for how departments will contribute to statewide safety goals.

- 2. Build the infrastructure for coordination, planning, and accountability.** Once a PSAI is authorized, its directors and partnering state agencies must develop the operational structure that enables sustained cross-agency coordination. This includes assembling a multidisciplinary team with government expertise, community relationships, strategic planning capacity, policy fluency, and lived experience. It also requires creating a statewide whole-of-government public safety plan that articulates priorities, timelines, and measures of success. To ensure consistency, the PSAI should institutionalize interagency workflows, establish protocols, and manage deliverables and progress tracking across departments.
- 3. Leverage convening power and strategic communications to sustain momentum.** Governors' communications teams, PSAI leadership, and agency public affairs offices must actively shape the narrative around public safety innovation to build legitimacy and maintain public and political support. Regular convenings with survivors, service providers, community leaders, researchers, and local officials can surface emerging needs, foster innovation, and reinforce shared priorities. Complementing this, a coordinated communications strategy should highlight progress, normalize cross-sector collaboration, and make the impact of the PSAI visible to stakeholders.

Without state action, there will be less support for people who have been victimized, fewer lives will be saved, and overreliance on a law enforcement workforce already spread thin will continue. States can create systems that sustain change and ensure that prevention, intervention, response, and recovery are not optional add-ons, but permanent fixtures in how safety is delivered.

# Toward an Infrastructure for Lasting Safety

The second Trump administration's actions underscore how fragile progress can be. The federal government has gutted investments in CVI, youth mental health, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention programs.<sup>38</sup> The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives' gun trafficking and rogue gun sales enforcement has been weakened.<sup>39</sup> WHOGVP was eliminated.<sup>40</sup>

The lesson is clear: real safety can't rest on any one administration, leader, or office. It must be built into how the government works. The WHOGVP experience shows what is possible when coordination, leadership, and investment align and what's lost when they disappear. But across the country, some places are proving that lasting safety can endure beyond election cycles (such as in the State of Washington and Richmond, California).<sup>41</sup> These experiences offer hope and a blueprint.

To build a safer future, cities and states must make a whole-of-government approach permanent. Public safety anchor institutions are a vehicle to do so, transforming safety from a passing priority into a lasting public good.

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