

# Seven Ways New Orleans Can Build Thriving Communities

Since 2023, the Vera Institute of Justice’s Louisiana office (Vera Louisiana) has partnered with community organizations and government agencies from different sectors—including housing, youth services, transportation, infrastructure, workers’ rights, and health care—to direct surplus and general funds in the New Orleans budget toward community priorities. With support from invested city leaders and other advocates, this group—the Big Easy Budget Coalition—has successfully advocated for approximately \$81 million to be spent on community priorities that build a thriving New Orleans.<sup>1</sup> Doing so has already strengthened communities and improved the lives of countless New Orleanians.

**New Orleans can take seven steps today to build thriving communities while increasing public safety.**

But more needs to be done to build on this strong start. The \$81 million—channeled into things known to improve public safety and quality of life—is not enough to meet the needs of our communities and pales in comparison to how much the city spends on the criminal justice system. Amidst a severe budget deficit, the city administration has proposed \$296.4 million to policing, courts, and the criminal legal system—a costly investment that fails to fully address people’s concerns about public safety—while proposing deep cuts to youth services, affordable housing, and community violence intervention and prevention programs.<sup>2</sup>

## The Big Easy Budget Coalition

Since 2022, the Big Easy Budget Coalition (BEBC) has brought together more than 40 New Orleans-based community organizations from different sectors to advocate for a safe, thriving New Orleans. The BEBC advocates for equitable resource allocation, builds community power, and prioritizes marginalized communities. Over the last two years, BEBC has advocated for more than \$140 million in community investments and successfully secured more than \$81 million toward its priority issue areas.<sup>a</sup> Additionally, due to BEBC budget advocacy, the council has taken steps towards greater transparency: it now produces a public document that details its amendments to the mayor’s proposed budget, including how much the amendment costs, which programs it impacts, and who requested the amendment.

<sup>a</sup> The \$81 million includes money allocated by the city to a range of programs and services, such as food security, community crisis intervention, and housing. A more detailed accounting of this number is available upon request from Cameryn Okeke, program manager, at [cokeke@vera.org](mailto:cokeke@vera.org). For more information, see [bigeasydeal.org](http://bigeasydeal.org).

Greater investments are needed in the types of services and programs that allow our communities to thrive while also building safety for all.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government allocated \$388 million in American Rescue Plan Act dollars to New Orleans—roughly \$1,000 per resident—giving the city unprecedented flexibility to use this money to weather the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Although the city promised investments in housing and other public services, advocates noted not enough was done to address the root causes of violence or provide sufficient recovery support for residents to thrive.<sup>4</sup>

Public safety remains a frequent concern for residents, but the criminal legal system approaches that the city invests in now are costly and ineffective.

Outlined in this primer are seven steps New Orleans can take to bolster public safety and build thriving communities.

## 1. Build a Comprehensive Community Safety Ecosystem

Thriving communities create safety by holistically and preventatively addressing the complex root causes of violence through partnerships beyond the criminal legal system. No single program or agency can ensure safety; instead, coordination and collaboration across sectors (housing, youth services, etc.) are essential to effectively respond to and prevent violence.<sup>5</sup> Government agencies must develop and implement sustainable solutions in partnership with local organizations and community members most impacted by violence.<sup>6</sup> In New Orleans, criminal legal system actors (including the police and district attorneys, among others) often dominate conversations about reducing violence, but the solutions they can offer for violence prevention are limited because their primary purpose is to respond to crime.

**Safety is created through a cohesive and comprehensive ecosystem of support and service.**

### **Boston: Community Investment and Crime Decline**

Investing in communities, especially in anti-violence programs, has made cities like Boston safer. Using federal funding post-pandemic, Boston made historic investments in comprehensive safety strategies. These relief funds reenergized economies and allowed some cities to bring to scale community investment in youth, infrastructure, and employment. Starting in 2023, violent crime around the country started to fall, a trend continuing into 2025.<sup>a</sup> Cities with historically high crime rates like Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis have seen huge declines in violence after investing heavily in their violence prevention efforts.<sup>b</sup> Unfortunately, federal funding cuts of \$168 million for evidence-based violence prevention strategies pose a threat to continuation of this crime decline.<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Real-Time Crime Index, “Reported UCR Part One Crimes by Month,” database (AH Datalytics, updated August 2025), <https://realtimecrimeindex.com>.

<sup>b</sup> “Crime Is Down in 2025. Trump Doesn’t Deserve Credit,” Vera Institute of Justice, June 20, 2025, <https://www.vera.org/news/crime-is-down-in-2025-trump-doesnt-deserve-credit>.

<sup>c</sup> “DOJ Funding Update: A Deeper Look at the Cuts,” Council on Criminal Justice (Washington, DC: 2025), <https://perma.cc/Z9CZ-87DB>.

In New Orleans, emerging community violence intervention and prevention (CVIP) initiatives like the Peace Ambassadors, Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion, and the Mobile Crisis Intervention Unit offer new spaces for coordination.<sup>7</sup> The success of CVIP services hinges on coordination with community leadership and advocates in other fields like youth, economics, and housing.<sup>8</sup> This “whole-of-city” approach, in which multiple departments and agencies collaborate to solve complex problems, can significantly strengthen violence prevention strategies.<sup>9</sup> Cities like Los Angeles and Oakland have taken this approach, which has led to more effective, community-engaged, and sustainable anti-violence efforts.<sup>10</sup> Boston—which invested in a comprehensive community safety ecosystem—saw an 82 percent reduction in homicides in the first quarter of 2024 compared to the previous year.<sup>11</sup>

## **2. Sustainably Fund Violence Prevention Services**

Thriving communities invest heavily in violence intervention and prevention programs that enhance community safety and offer greater community engagement in public safety strategies. According to the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, community violence intervention and prevention efforts are “designed to prevent the reoccurrence of violence or intervene and prevent the imminent act of violence.”<sup>12</sup> From hospital-based interventions to improving street lighting to credible messenger programs, these efforts range in scope, directness, and effectiveness, but most center community engagement and relationship building to counter and prevent violence.<sup>13</sup> While these efforts have shown generally positive successes, challenges such as inadequate funding, lack of political will, and inconsistent management can hinder their long-term impact and effectiveness.<sup>14</sup>

Over the last decade, New Orleans has implemented various violence prevention programs, including CeaseFire and hospital-intervention models.<sup>15</sup> CeaseFire is a violence interrupter model that uses trained neighborhood change agents to intervene in community conflicts and build healing relationships with those involved in gun violence.<sup>16</sup> In New Orleans, these programs have lacked the stability and sustainability needed for continued impact. Specifically, CeaseFire, started in 2012 by Mayor Mitch Landrieu, was successful for years before it was restructured in 2018 as Cure Violence by Mayor LaToya Cantrell’s administration. The anti-violence work was restructured again under the Office of Gun Violence Prevention in 2021, losing staff and effectiveness along the way, and then abandoned because of funding issues in 2023.<sup>17</sup> Currently, the New Orleans Health Department is leading efforts to create a robust anti-violence program through the Office of Violence Prevention (OVP).<sup>18</sup> However, the OVP receives less than 2 percent (\$2 million) of the police department’s budget (\$174.9 million).<sup>19</sup>

In the 2024 budget, New Orleans, at the behest of the Big Easy Budget Coalition, made an important step toward funding the OVP, but more is needed. Moreover, creating a dedicated and independent funding stream for hospital-based and community-based violence prevention programs would create stability across administrations and allow for deeper impact. The OVP can secure stable funding streams for its work through recurring appropriations in the city’s general fund, as Los Angeles does; establishing a neighborhood safety fund, as Cleveland has; or raising funds through a ballot initiative, like Oakland did.<sup>20</sup>

## **3. Reduce Contact with the Criminal Legal System**

Thriving communities prioritize diversion, decriminalization, and restorative justice and address the root causes of crime rather than relying on punitive criminal legal contact, especially for youth. Regardless of their level of culpability, when people are pulled into the criminal legal system, they generally end up with worse life outcomes, and this is particularly true for young people.<sup>21</sup> Most methods of criminal punishment inflict harm (financial, physical, or psychological).<sup>22</sup> For example, incarceration separates people from their personal support networks, leaving them at risk of isolation, economic ruin, homelessness, and substance

use conditions.<sup>23</sup> To mitigate these effects, the city should continue to fund diversion and community-based accountability programs.<sup>24</sup>

In 2023, New Orleans partnered with the Center for Restorative Approaches to establish a pre-charge diversion program that redirects young people accused of certain criminal charges to community-based resolution processes.<sup>25</sup> Programs such as these can help survivors meet their self-identified healing and justice needs and reduce fear and post-traumatic stress.<sup>26</sup> The city also invested in school-based restorative justice programs to resolve youth conflicts, prevent tragic escalation of conflict, and prevent youth involvement in the criminal legal system.<sup>27</sup> To further reduce the harms of the criminal legal system and address underlying issues, prosecutors should refuse low-level nonviolent offenses that pose no threat to public safety (such as crimes related to poverty and housing insecurity, sex work, possession of controlled substances, and quality-of-life crimes like disorderly conduct).<sup>28</sup>

### **Preventing violence by centering equity**

New Orleans has a long history of racial segregation and economic inequality.<sup>a</sup> These disparities are threats to safety, especially for an area like the Lower Ninth Ward, which suffers from higher flood risk and lower economic investment.<sup>b</sup> Since divestment and disenfranchisement impact some communities more than others, equity must guide how New Orleans builds a thriving community to avoid perpetuating a history of leaving behind communities of color.<sup>c</sup> Investment must intentionally center historically marginalized groups (working class, Black and Latinx, LGBTQ+, and disabled communities) to reverse disparities and create lasting security for all.

<sup>a</sup> Othering & Belonging Institute, “City Snapshot: New Orleans,” 2025, <https://perma.cc/G2PW-KEHY>.

<sup>b</sup> Lauren J. Krivo, Ruth D. Peterson, and Danielle C. Kuhl, “Segregation, Racial Structure, and Neighborhood Violent Crime,” *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 6 (2009), 1765–1802, <https://doi.org/10.1086/597285>; Jeffrey T. Ulmer, Casey T. Harris, and Darrell Steffensmeier, “Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Structural Disadvantage and Crime: White, Black, and Hispanic Comparisons,” *Social Science Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (2012), 799–819, <https://perma.cc/L5EF-2LZ5>; and Jerry V. Graves Jr., *Risk, Vulnerability, and Hazards: The Industrial Canal and the Lower Ninth Ward* (PhD diss., University of New Orleans, 2012), <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2598&context=td>.

<sup>c</sup> Robert Habans and Haleigh Tomlin, “A Profile of Wealth in the New Orleans Metro,” The Data Center, June 18, 2024, <https://perma.cc/M8YK-KZZ5>.

## **4. Equitably Meet Residents’ Basic Needs**

Thriving communities meet residents’ basic needs and promote access to nutritious food, physical and mental health care, housing, education, and gainful employment. Meeting residents’ basic needs alleviates stress and conflict and thereby reduces violence.<sup>29</sup>

## How to Meet New Orleanians' Basic Needs

Basic need	Impact on safety	The city should:
Mental health	Mental health support and crisis response reduce instances of violence—especially among youth—and reliance on police to respond to mental health crises. <sup>30</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in collective efforts to reduce barriers to access to mental health services and integrate primary and behavioral health care in community-based settings.</li> <li>• Fund a campaign to raise awareness of behavioral health services availability and wait times.</li> <li>• Ensure all residents have access to broadband for telehealth.</li> </ul>
Housing	Reducing homelessness and creating housing stability for those most at risk will also reduce health care costs, decrease incarceration, boost incomes, and help children succeed in school. <sup>31</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a long-term housing plan.</li> <li>• Ensure the housing that exists is safe and healthy.</li> <li>• Rehabilitate existing housing stock.</li> <li>• Build new permanently affordable and climate-resistant housing on high ground.</li> <li>• Vote in favor of affordable housing in areas of opportunity to reduce racial segregation and concentrations of poverty.</li> </ul>
Education	Investing in the social safety net bolsters educational attainment, which leads to better health and safety outcomes for individual people and communities. <sup>32</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reconcile \$90M debt owed to the New Orleans school board.</li> <li>• Offer affordable and accessible options for adult education.</li> </ul>
Food	Access to high-quality food and proper nutrition has been shown to reduce aggression and improve adult and youth health and social outcomes. <sup>33</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase food security grants from \$1M to \$5M to include more organizations, and ensure the current programs are sustainably funded.</li> <li>• Permanently fund city positions like the City Food Access Specialist to focus on improving food security, urban agriculture, and food licensing.</li> <li>• Audit and update the Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance to address widespread issues in zoning and permitting for food businesses.</li> <li>• Provide infrastructure dollars to transform the Myrtle Banks building into a food hub.</li> <li>• Support the creation of a citywide Urban Agriculture and Food Plan.</li> </ul>
Employment	Living wages, economic opportunity, and gainful employment reduce the risk of violence in communities, especially for youth. <sup>34</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise and enforce the Livable Wages Ordinance to \$26 an hour.</li> <li>• Expand summer youth jobs programs.</li> <li>• Conduct a labor rights audit to ensure compliance and protect workers from wage theft.</li> </ul>

- Allocate funds to enforce the Workers’ Bill of Rights.

Physical health      Improvements to physical health and access to health care can reduce stress, anxiety, and ultimately, the likelihood of harming others.<sup>35</sup>

- Invest in public transportation to improve access to health care appointments.
- Leverage New Orleans Tourism and Cultural Fund to improve access to health care for hospitality workers and culture bearers.
- Create a \$1 million fund that provides navigational support for health care coverage for all, regardless of employer or employment status.

## 5. Strengthen Support for Youth and Families

Thriving communities have services and programs that support strong interpersonal relationships and a sense of interdependence through culture and community building. Children, adolescents, and young adults flourish when the adults in their families and communities can provide them with safe, stable, and caring environments.<sup>36</sup> Youth ages 18 and under make up 20 percent of the city’s population, but the budget for the Office for Youth and Families is less than 5 percent of the city budget.<sup>37</sup> Thirty-two percent of children under 18 live below the poverty level in New Orleans—which is 7 percentage points higher than the state and 16 percentage points higher than the national average.<sup>38</sup>

Compared to Louisiana and the rest of the country, New Orleans youth have higher rates of unemployment, lower birth weights, and higher likelihood of receiving out-of-school suspensions, all of which are associated with lower academic performance and a higher likelihood of criminal legal system involvement.<sup>39</sup>

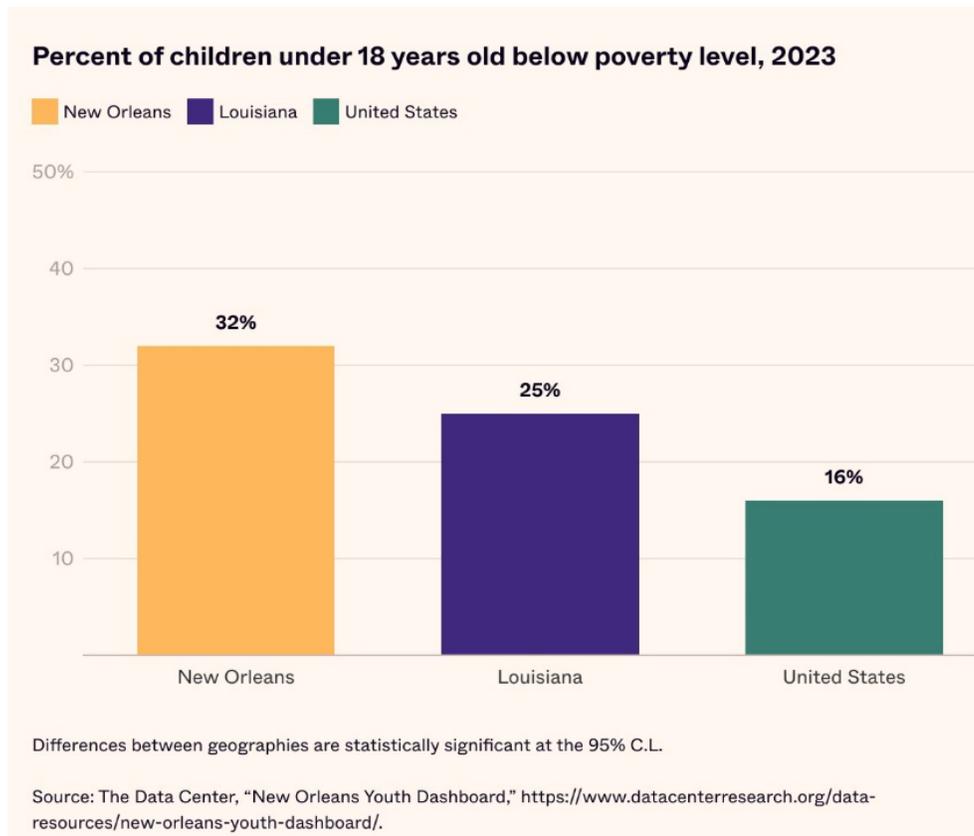
The city has made progress toward providing necessary support for youth. The city has piloted a zero-fare program for young people on public transportation, made an initial investment in the creation of a Youth Data Hub to coordinate and share data about youth-

serving programs, launched Family Connects to provide postpartum support, and launched ThriveKids to provide mental health care services to youth.<sup>40</sup> These steps represent progress, but the city has not invested enough in out-of-school programming and support for homeless youth to meet the growing need.

The city should fully fund the Youth Master Plan—a 10-year strategy developed by young people, educators, parents, and experts to improve the lives of children, youth, and families in New Orleans by addressing cycles of disinvestment, strengthening youth-centered policies and practices, and dismantling false narratives about youth.<sup>41</sup> Although the early childhood education millage fund allocates funding for some programs, the city would benefit from a millage fund dedicated to out-of-school services and support. The recently passed state law lowering the age at which people are charged as adults to 17—and efforts to expand the offenses for which youth under 17 are charged as adults—make this need even more pressing.<sup>42</sup> The city must work to deeply invest in the types of supportive services that are proven to keep young people out of the criminal legal system.

## 6. Improve the Built Environment

Thriving communities have life-affirming urban design with clean air, abundant greenery, affordable housing, reliable infrastructure, and accessible transportation. The built environment includes all natural and designed aspects of the city's surroundings, ranging from public spaces to infrastructure to transportation.<sup>43</sup> The environment has an impact on interpersonal and community dynamics. For example, early exposure to air pollution may increase children's risk of engaging in aggressive and violent behaviors both as youth and later as adults.<sup>44</sup> New Orleans has higher than average ozone levels, which are highly correlated with increased violent disciplinary incidents among youth.<sup>45</sup> Other issues with the built environment, such as deteriorating housing quality, lack of lighting, and blight also negatively impact community well-being and safety, especially for youth.<sup>46</sup> Poor transit accessibility impedes residents' ability to work, patronize



businesses, and connect with their communities.<sup>47</sup> Cleaner air and greater access to green spaces, however, are associated with reduced crime rates.<sup>48</sup> A well-built and maintained community increases social cohesion, which has a protective effect against crime and violence.<sup>49</sup>

Using American Rescue Funds, the city has been making some improvements to New Orleans’s built environments by cleaning catch basins, maintaining greenery, piloting a zero-fare transit program, and establishing a “pocket park” program.<sup>50</sup> To further improve the built environment and help New Orleans thrive, the city needs to do the following:

- improve air quality by creating more green spaces;
- increase and improve affordable housing stock on high ground;<sup>51</sup>
- reduce residential vacancies and blight by offering rental and owner-occupied assistance;
- improve the climate and flood resistance of the city by enacting the climate action plan;<sup>52</sup>
- improve the transit infrastructure (such as by adding dedicated bus lanes);
- enhance job accessibility by creating a transportation budget line item;
- create a permanent zero-fare policy; and
- launch pilot programs that increase public access to amenities like green space and Wi-Fi.

“The city doesn’t have a long-term housing plan. Thriving looks like people with power making big investments and following a plan.”  
—Monique Blossom, director of policy and communications, Louisiana Fair Housing Action Center

*Source: Phone call with Vera on August 20, 2025.*

## 7. Adopt an Inclusive and Participatory Budget Process

Thriving communities engage their residents in the budget process, ensuring spending aligns with community priorities and needs. Participatory budgeting processes help redistribute public funds and improve services in underserved areas.<sup>53</sup> Participatory budgets also create opportunities for more civic participation, which has been shown to help reduce violence levels within communities.<sup>54</sup> Communities across the country and across the world have adopted elements of participatory budgeting to promote greater inclusion and transparency and improve public trust.<sup>55</sup> Boston, for example, has seen major investment in budget participation and transparency while driving violent crime down to historic lows.<sup>56</sup> New Orleans can take steps to advance these aims by taking the following steps.

- **Engage residents earlier in the budget process, before decisions are made.** The city should require departments to involve the community in budget planning each spring when they prepare their budgets; expand two-way dialogue between decision-makers and residents; and improve transparency by providing clear, detailed information on departmental budget meetings so residents can be engaged and informed throughout the process.
- **Provide accessible data on the budget and spending.** To keep the city accountable, residents and advocates must be able to easily track the details of budget allocations. A step toward this would be to release the budget in a machine-readable format, such as a spreadsheet or one of many available dashboard products designed to make city budgets transparent. A publicly available, machine-readable budget allows for easy upload and analysis in Excel, drastically reducing the amount of time and effort needed to track public spending.

- **Prioritize input from marginalized communities.** The city must move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and actively seek and incorporate input from people of color, renters, young people, and people with low incomes to ensure an inclusive budget that serves all communities.

Transparency alone will not solve New Orleans’s issues, but when combined with deep investment in under-resourced communities, it can boost civic participation, address community needs, and alleviate poverty and disempowerment.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

The New Orleans City Budget is more than just a financial document; it is a blueprint for the city that future New Orleanians will inherit. Vera Louisiana and the Big Easy Budget Coalition seek to build a New Orleans that mitigates violence and prevents harm by ensuring everyone has access to safe, stable, and nurturing relationships, communities, and environments—a place where residents, especially youth, have access to affordable mental and physical health support. The coalition strives for a New Orleans in which every child can benefit from quality education, an abundance of after-school programs, and world-class out-of-school programming.

In the city that the coalition is working toward, the streets would be well maintained, clean, and lit. The buses would come on time and allow no-barrier access to the entire city. In a thriving New Orleans, residents would have not only living-wage jobs but also safe, reliable, and enjoyable transit between their home and work. All residents would have access to healthy, high-quality food produced and sold locally. Affordable and stable housing would ensure that everyone has a safe place to call home. All these systems are interconnected: when one flourishes, they all benefit. Investing in meeting people’s basic needs frees up their time to participate in and contribute to their communities, show up for youth and children, and reinvest in the future of New Orleans. When we invest in addressing root causes, violence and homicide can fall by double-digit percentages: cities like Boston are demonstrating that this isn’t a fluke—it’s happening.<sup>58</sup> By choosing to invest in people, New Orleans can build a safer, healthier, and more vibrant city for generations to come.

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The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and policy experts working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they’re fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn’t determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera’s headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit [vera.org](https://vera.org). For more information about this brief, contact Cameryn Okeke, program manager, at [cokeke@vera.org](mailto:cokeke@vera.org).

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This figure includes money allocated by the city to a wide range of programs and services including food security, community crisis intervention, housing, and restorative approaches to school conflict—among many others. A more detailed accounting of this number is on file with the authors and is available upon request from Cameryn Okeke, program manager, at [cokeke@vera.org](mailto:cokeke@vera.org). For more on the Big Easy Budget Coalition, see “The Big Easy Deal,” Big Easy Budget Coalition, [www.bigeasydeal.org](http://www.bigeasydeal.org), and Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy, “Case Study: Big Easy Budget Coalition Drives Equitable Investments in New Orleans,” <https://perma.cc/6ZW8-8W2G>.
- <sup>2</sup> Committee for a Better New Orleans, “Residents’ Guide to the City Budget,” <https://www.cbno.org/budget>. See also City of New Orleans, “City of New Orleans Budget,” September 30, 2025, <https://nola.gov/next/mayors-office/topics/budget>.
- <sup>3</sup> City of New Orleans, “American Rescue Plan Act: Frequently Asked Questions,” January 7, 2025, <https://nola.gov/next/arpa/faq>.
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- <sup>7</sup> New Orleans Health Department, Office of Violence Prevention, “Building Peace in Our Community,” August 25, 2025, <https://nola.gov/next/office-of-violence-prevention/topics/community-based-violence-prevention>; New Orleans Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion, “Care Transforms Communities,” <https://perma.cc/JKY7-WMVZ>; Resources for Human Development, “New Orleans Mobile Crisis Intervention Unit,” 2025, <https://perma.cc/9AKU-Q06C>.
- <sup>8</sup> Tan de Bibiana, Mulligan, Stagoff-Belfort, and Gilbert, *Coordinating Safety*, 2023.
- <sup>9</sup> Tan de Bibiana, Mulligan, Stagoff-Belfort, and Gilbert, *Coordinating Safety*, 2023; Hernán Flom and Alfredo Malaret Baldo, *Lessons from Effective Offices of Violence Prevention* (Vienna, Austria: Peace in Our Cities, 2024), 8, <https://perma.cc/9S7A-ZNW2>; and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “About the Public Health Approach to Violence Prevention,” April 9, 2024, <https://perma.cc/ZZM4-69HG>.
- <sup>10</sup> County of Los Angeles Public Health, “Gun Violence Prevention Platform,” <https://perma.cc/U8DR-TZDM>; Los Angeles County Office of Violence Prevention, *Early Implementation Strategic Plan: A Blueprint for Peace and Healing 2020–2024* (Los Angeles: LA County Office of Violence Prevention, 2020), <https://perma.cc/WNF8-2KV6>; and Buggs, *Community-Based Violence Interruption*, 2022.
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- <sup>16</sup> For discussion of the violence interruption model, see Vera Institute of Justice, *Community Violence Intervention Programs, Explained* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://www.vera.org/inline-downloads/community-violence-intervention-programs-explained-report.pdf>.

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