

The Case for Expanded Gun Violence Problem Analysis

Vera's Redefining Public Safety initiative works with local governments and community leaders to build community-centered and coordinated approaches to creating safety. This includes expanding non-police response to 911 crisis calls, investing in civilian-led approaches to violence prevention and intervention, and building and institutionalizing public safety infrastructures outside the criminal legal system. To be sustainable and effective, these infrastructures should adopt a public health framework, leverage data-informed decision-making, and focus on community-centered strategies. Gun violence problem analysis (GVPA) can be an important component of this work.

Traditionally, GVPA refers to the analysis of data on fatal and non-fatal shootings to establish a common understanding of local violence dynamics and inform the development and implementation of violence reduction strategies.¹ Although there is variability in the scope and process of GVPA, it generally involves identifying the characteristics of, and relationships between, people involved in recent fatal and non-fatal shootings. People involved in shootings are, by definition, at greatest risk of future interpersonal violence and gun violence. Therefore, jurisdictions generally use GVPA to inform near-term violence intervention strategies—including group violence intervention strategies, focused deterrence, and fellowship/mentorship programs that focus on people at highest risk of violence.²

This concept paper proposes an expanded version of GVPA that can inform the system changes and strategies necessary for more comprehensive and sustained improvements in public safety. Like a traditional GVPA, this expanded approach analyzes data to guide the development of community violence reduction strategies. However, unlike traditional GVPA, the expanded approach also illuminates the social-structural factors that drive violence, such as economic and housing insecurity. While traditional GVPA is designed to inform strategies for near-term community violence *intervention*, this expanded approach can help develop longer-term strategies to support violence *prevention* efforts. These include strategies to improve access to economic opportunity, housing, and healthcare. It also prioritizes comprehensive strategy development and capacity-building for sustainability.

Expanded gun violence problem analysis can help develop interventions to reduce gender-based violence and violence associated with economic and housing insecurity, inform prevention and system transformation, and prioritize capacity-building for sustainability.

Expanding Data Inputs to Ensure Comprehensive Strategy Development

Traditional GVPA involves analysis of several key factors, such as

- the rate of gun violence over time;
- characteristics of people who have perpetrated or been harmed by gun violence, including their prior contact with the criminal legal system; and
- incident reviews and audits to identify specific groups of people actively involved in violence and the relationships among them.

Jurisdictions use this information to understand local violence dynamics and identify the people most at risk of perpetrating or being harmed by gun violence. These insights are essential to the development of effective intervention strategies.

As this brief explains, expanded GVPA can inform more comprehensive strategies. It does so by pulling in data on a wider range of factors that contribute to violence—factors beyond group-related violence dynamics—allowing communities to build evidence-informed prevention strategies and make the case for wider system transformation.

Data analysis allows for crime prevention and system transformation

Expanded GVPA incorporates measures of social-structural investment and public health. This additional data can provide evidence of how violence relates to structural disinvestment. For example, it can reveal how metrics such as neighborhood water quality, walkability, disparities in mental health resources, and social-structural factors (such as school quality and employment opportunity) relate to local violence dynamics. Jurisdictions can use this information to drive long-term violence prevention and system transformation.

The expanded analysis recognizes that sustainable violence reduction requires investment not just in short-term intervention efforts but also in longer-term prevention and system transformation—which can take five to 20 years to demonstrate impact.³ Initial and ongoing expanded GVPA can, therefore, create a baseline to identify needs, facilitate data-informed prevention strategy development, and track changes in social investment.

Comprehensive strategies account for gender-based, intimate partner, family, and other forms of violence

Both traditional and expanded GVPA incorporate systematic analysis of violence dynamics, including incident reviews and group audits. These approaches are critical to accurately identify and understand the specific small percentage of the population driving a high proportion of the violence—insights that can help jurisdictions focus and prioritize interventions with those specific people and groups to achieve community-level reductions in violence.

Incident reviews in many jurisdictions reveal a high proportion of group-involved community violence alongside other violence dynamics that also deserve attention; however, the strategies that have typically emerged from traditional GVPA have generally focused on intervening in group violence dynamics. Expanded GVPA can go further to target specific risks related to gender-based, intimate partner, and family violence, as well as risks associated with structural vulnerability, such as housing instability or unmet behavioral health needs. There have been persistent limitations in the breadth of intervention opportunities jurisdictions identify, as well as limited actionable analysis examining the overlap among these various violence dynamics and group/community violence. Like other community violence dynamics, intervening in and preventing these forms of violence requires community-based solutions outside of law enforcement and the criminal legal system.

Expanding GVPA Processes to Prioritize Sustainability

Expanded GVPA should become an institutionalized part of every jurisdiction's process for ongoing violence prevention and intervention strategy refinement. This requires establishing sustainable data analysis processes and an infrastructure that facilitates cross-sector and civilian-led coordination.

Building local and civilian-led data access and capacity

Many regional and national organizations bring robust GVPA skills in doing site-specific work. Ideally, these organizations conduct this work in a process that creates a sustainable infrastructure in the local jurisdiction—one that allows GVPA to become an ongoing component of local violence reduction efforts.

A sustainable process that facilitates local resource investments (for staffing and software) and capacity building (in data collection, sharing, and analysis skills and infrastructure) ensures that jurisdictions are not reliant on time-limited external support. This can be accomplished by institutionalizing GVPA within a local civilian-led government agency, such as a city health department or office of neighborhood safety or violence prevention.⁴ Another way to create sustainability is through government partnership with a local academic institution or community-based organization (CBO) with research capacity.⁵

Institutionalizing GVPA can address data analysis capacity gaps that exist in government agencies and in CBOs that are rightly focused on program delivery. It can also help identify and mitigate data sharing challenges resulting from software, legal, or technical constraints and/or lack of trust between collaborating agencies.

For any violence intervention or prevention effort to be truly effective, it must have the support of the community. To achieve this, it is important that jurisdictions embed GVPA processes in networks made up of academic institutions, civilian agencies, and CBOs—and not within law enforcement—and that these partnerships support one-way flows of data and information from law enforcement to civilian practitioners. Taking these steps can protect the integrity of the network and help mitigate community concerns that any new violence reduction strategies will only increase police surveillance or enforcement. Institutionalizing GVPA within civilian-led agencies or CBOs can democratize the ways data about violence and victimization (including policing data) is analyzed and interpreted. It would also help address long-standing disparities in the resources and money invested in law enforcement relative to civilian-led approaches to safety.

Ensuring accountability to the community

Expanded GVPA requires robust community input into the research questions being asked and the interpretation of findings. This requires engagement with people impacted by violence, those working in and advocating for violence reduction, and an array of community stakeholders more generally. Such a process may include community presentation and discussion sessions; presentations with key stakeholder groups and professionals; the creation of a community advisory board composed of people impacted by violence; and a commitment to public reporting on violence-reduction investments, activities, and outcomes.

Conclusion

Vera recommends that local jurisdictions implement expanded gun violence problem analysis strategies that can support sustainable, civilian-led, and comprehensive violence reduction efforts. Scopes of work for contracted GVPA providers ought to prioritize capacity building and concrete sustainability plans so analysis can become an ongoing local-level practice. And as researchers, field advisors, and practitioners learn from GVPA findings, they must not ignore gender-based and domestic violence or the need for longer-term investments in tandem with near-term violence intervention strategies.

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. For more information about this brief, contact Daniela Gilbert, director, Redefining Public Safety, at dgilbert@vera.org.

Endnotes

- ¹ California Partnership for Safe Communities, *Portland Homicide Problem Analysis 2019-2021* (Oakland, CA: California Partnership for Safe Communities and Portland Police Bureau, 2021), p4-5, <https://perma.cc/7KPU-BHR7>; and National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR), *Gun Violence Problem Analysis: Summary Report* (Washington, DC: NICJR, 2023), 2, 17-18, <https://perma.cc/HTX3-H2DN>.
- ² See California Partnership for Safe Communities, *Oakland Homicide Problem Analysis 2016-2017*, (Oakland, CA: California Partnership for Safe Communities and Oakland Police Department, 2021), <https://perma.cc/R7WA-RA8D>; California Partnership for Safe Communities, *Portland Shooting & Homicide Problem Analysis 2015-2019*, (Oakland, CA: California Partnership for Safe Communities and Portland Police Bureau, 2021), <https://perma.cc/UF2A-P24F>; California Partnership for Safe Communities, *Understanding Serious Violence in San Francisco 2017-2020*, Executive Summary, (Oakland, CA: California Partnership for Safe Communities and San Francisco Police Department, 2021), <https://perma.cc/6WN7-ZHKA>; National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, *Indianapolis, Indiana Gun Violence Problem Analysis, Summary Report March 2018 – February 2020*, (Washington, DC: NICJR, 2021), <https://perma.cc/UB4T-PLAN>; National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, *Gun Violence Assessment Atlanta, Georgia*, (Washington, DC: NICJR), <https://nicjr.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Atlanta-GVA-5.2022.pdf>; and Lisa Barao and Christopher Mastroianni, *Knoxville Gun Violence Problem Analysis 2019-2021*, (Thomas Abt and Knoxville Police Department), <https://perma.cc/N2X5-Q78R>.
- ³ National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, *A Landscape Analysis of Washington, DC Community Based Services and Supports* (Oakland, CA: NICJR, 2021), 3, <https://perma.cc/9XZH-XM7N>.
- ⁴ See the Newark Public Safety Collaborative (<https://newarkcollaborative.org/>); the Mecklenburg County, North Carolina Office of Violence Prevention's Community Violence Data Dashboard (<https://tableau.charlottenc.gov/t/Public/views/CommunityViolenceDashboard/Introduction?%3Aembed=y&%3Aiid=4&%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y>); and the Carolina Violence Prevention Collaborative (<https://health.mecknc.gov/population-health/ovp> or <https://linktr.ee/cvpc>) as examples of government-community partnerships for data analysis and strategy development.
- ⁵ See the Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research and Science (<https://www.cornersresearch.org/our-projects>) in Chicago as an example of academic partnership to support and inform community and government violence reduction strategies.