

Anti-violence Intervention

“By Community, for Community”:

Q&A with Research Expert Shani Buggs



Shani Buggs, PhD, is a public health researcher at the University of California, Davis, and one of the nation's leading experts on anti-racist methods for reducing gun violence in American communities. Here, Buggs answers our questions about outreach-based community violence intervention (CVI), a grassroots approach to quelling violence that is the subject of a comprehensive new research paper she and her colleagues authored in collaboration with LISC.

Does the public grasp the nature of gun violence in America? Do people understand which people and places are most affected?

[Dr. Shani Buggs] No, most people don't understand. The overwhelming majority of violence in America is not random. It is spontaneous, but it is not random. It is concentrated among individuals who have experienced multiple levels of structural violence and been chronically exposed to the notion that violence is power. In neighborhoods that experience high rates of violence, it is concentrated within city blocks, within street segments. And within those places, only a small percentage of the population is at highest risk for violence involvement.

I say “violence involvement” because the victim-offender overlap is real. Most of the individuals who go on to commit violence have been victims or survivors of violence themselves, including, as I said, structural violence—intergenerational poverty, lack of access to economic opportunity and housing and food stability, mass incarceration and the violence that comes from and with incarceration, exposure to family violence or intimate partner violence in the home, witnessing community violence as children. It's often just assumed that, “Oh well, those people are just violent. People are born violent.” But violence is learned and it is cultivated. That means that we can undo the circumstances and factors that lead to increased risk of violence. I think that the broad public doesn't fully understand that.

The cornerstone of CVI is outreach workers who have relatable lived experience, who oftentimes have had some

involvement with the criminal justice system themselves. Why is that important, and what other skills or qualities do CVI workers need to possess?

I think lived experience is sometimes more narrowly defined than is necessary. An effective outreach worker is someone who is relatable and credible to the audience that they're trying to engage. Do I have to have spent 10 years incarcerated to be a credible messenger? Not necessarily, but I have to understand and relate to your experience as someone who is formerly incarcerated. So I've got to have empathy, relatability, persistence, thick skin.

The role requires someone who understands how frustration and pressure can come from all of these structural failures, and how trauma shows up and can impact behaviors and perspectives. It also requires someone who can be a connector, because violence interruption is a band-aid, if you will, that helps right now to resolve a conflict that could boil over into lethal activity, but how do you keep violence from showing up again? That could require any number of services and supports. So it takes a person who really understands how to help connect somebody.

CVI has been around for decades, mostly in the form of local grassroots organizations that are self-made and have been under-recognized and grossly underfunded. What's different about this moment, and what's the state of the evidence for CVI's effectiveness?

In terms of what's different, it's hard to overestimate the impact of 2020. COVID-19 helped bring widespread recognition of structural racial and ethnic inequities across multiple systems, and there's new awareness that the way we have conducted

public safety in the past has the potential to bring horrendous consequences to communities. All that is happening, and you've had a continuous drumbeat of advocates and survivors and organizers saying, "We need something else, and here is something else that you can invest in."

And so the Biden-Harris administration took heed and has lifted up violence intervention as a language, a terminology, and has put money behind it. It's now gained nationwide attention. So more people are like, "What is it? How do you do it? Is it effective?" I get very frustrated by that last question, in part because there have been only about a dozen external evaluations of CVI programs, and there was lots of variation in the programs' implementations and operations. We're not even staffing and funding these programs consistently enough for them to have the kind of continuous effort we can evaluate. So the research has been limited and mixed.

How do you stand up the CVI organization in a way that is adequate? And then how do you see these behavioral changes over time? I'm hopeful that the research dollars that have been provided [by the federal government] will begin to help us uncover some of those pieces. Because of the recent rise in violence, there's this knee-jerk reaction to send police. It's important to note that the evidence for sending in more police to reduce violence is thin. There's mounting evidence of the harms and collateral consequences that come from just adding more police.

Your interview structure for the research paper allowed you to sit down with CVI leaders and have honest conversations. What are their challenges? What do they worry about?

Well, they worry about the health and wellness of their staff, and they worry about political support. They know, because people don't know about these programs and our societal deference is towards police, that very easily and quickly, one mistake, one stumble brings the critics, and the critics say, "Why are we investing in these criminals? Why don't we just give money to the police?" So the political support is just huge, and that means support across various stakeholder groups, but including those who have the bully pulpit, those who have the largest and loudest voices and the most influence.

You mentioned the wellness of staff. The work is technically difficult, emotionally hard, and potentially dangerous. What do funders and society in general need to do to support this workforce?

I would say investment. I mean, funding, funding, funding. Investment in staff wages, in ample staffing, in team-building and wellness resources in-house or externally. Some of the trauma around doing this work comes because for a lot of folks

it's been grant funded. So the grant cycle ends, I don't know if I'm going to be able to pay my staff. People get fired or let go and brought back, and let go and brought back, and that is no way to actually support a workforce that you're hoping will save lives.

So invest in true support of the staff, and I would follow that up with getting proximate to these organizations, building relationships in trust and listening. There's far too much outside commentary about how we resolve violence without engaging people who have been doing violence intervention work forever, and people who are in communities most impacted by violence, folks who've had family members that have died by violence and been locked up for murder. That's how you begin to understand the nuances and can ask, are the strategies we currently have on the table all that we can do or should we be doing more? We need to be innovating.

Finally, we have to think about how we keep people from becoming at highest risk for violence involvement, and that looks like investing in the resources that are available to program participants—housing relocation, mental health support, access to healthcare, job training—and broader investment in communities. How do you remove the traumas and the exposure to structural violence for everybody?

Given the anxiety about being unfunded and scarcely recognized in the past, is there also now some discomfort about CVI potentially being co-opted or branded by powerful outside entities?

Absolutely. This is work that has been done by community, for community. And so there is a real desire for the federal government, for any funders to recognize that there is expertise and wisdom in the communities. Now that there's funding available, don't give the money to folks who don't have the experience and have not helped to build the field to where it is now.

A lot of these programs have infrastructure challenges, administrative challenges with receiving federal money—receiving grants, period. Their focus is on saving lives, not on managing grants or compliance. What funders can do is support that organizational development, invest in the people, and rather than becoming technical-assistance providers themselves, hire the folks who are doing the work. Invest in them. ■



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