

REDUCING VIOLENCE RESEARCH AGENDA

OVERVIEW

This document is an overview of Arnold Ventures’ research agenda on reducing violence and is guided by AV’s mission of maximizing opportunity and minimizing injustice. The purpose of this research agenda is to develop and build the evidence base on violence reduction strategies and programs to support communities, policymakers, and law enforcement agencies in their efforts. Specifically, AV supports research to better understand effective strategies to reduce community violence by focusing on the most high-risk people and places and promoting effective policing, and ensuring that what is learned leads to scalable results. Five overarching goals motivate our work:

1. Reduce community violence perpetration and victimization, especially among young Black and Brown males;
2. Increase community involvement in reporting and preventing crime;
3. Increase police effectiveness in preventing and investigating violent crime;
4. Promote justice and fairness for all members of communities impacted by violence; and
5. Strengthen decisionmakers’ ability to plan, launch, and sustain effective violence reduction strategies.

We seek to advance these goals by developing research under three main pillars: addressing immediate crises of violence, identifying and addressing the underlying causes of violence, and promoting effective police investigations to solve violent crime. This approach recognizes that decisionmakers facing an urgent demand to act in response to emergent violence need to pinpoint the particular problem of violence in their community quickly and accurately and identify effective solutions to stop the shooting. We also underscore that longer-term approaches to tackle the underlying causes of community violence are needed to sustain reductions in violence and build a more durable

peace. Finally, where violence does occur, we seek to develop research that supports more effective, timely investigations that deliver justice for victims of crime and their families.

Arnold Ventures’ research philosophy is to support research that accurately and significantly reduces the most pressing uncertainties affecting policy. More information about our approach to funding research is [available here](#). This research agenda is part of a holistic effort to achieve the above goals, and is intended to complement our policy advocacy, strategic litigation, and strategic communication efforts and investments.

OUTCOMES

Though the reduction of violence is a primary outcome of interest for this research agenda, *sustaining* reductions in violence requires both the absence of violence and the active creation of the conditions that increase individual wellbeing and community safety. Research that addresses the underlying causes of violence—the social and economic inequities that characterize the communities most impacted by violence—is thus of great interest, as reflected in the outcomes listed here. We also consider outcomes across multiple levels of analysis, including individuals (and families), community, and systems.

- At the **individual level**, we are interested in measures of direct and vicarious victimization and of direct and indirect involvement with, or risk of involvement with, violent crime. We are also interested in studies that document how violence reduction strategies promote success and behavior change among individuals involved in violence. Relevant indicators may include measures of employment, economic stability and mobility, training and skills development, housing and residential

stability, family stability and functioning, health, mental health, and wellbeing, as well as access to treatment services and public benefits. We are also interested in individual attitudes and perceptions of police legitimacy and the efficacy and fairness of violence reduction strategies.

- At the **community level**, we are interested in measures of violence reduction (e.g., decreases in violent crime, arrests for violent crime, reports of victimization) and community safety and wellbeing (e.g., community-level measures of employment, economic stability, residential stability, physical and mental health, collective efficacy, legal cynicism) and the extent to which various violence reduction strategies are perceived to be more efficient, effective, fair, and legitimate.
- At the **system level**, we are interested in understanding disparities, resource allocations, budgets, cost savings and efficiencies, as well as system processes, procedures, and decision points related to violence reduction (for example, what organizational processes and structures facilitate or impede investigative efforts and contribute to or disrupt successful investigative outcomes?).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS, BY GOAL

This research agenda is based on a robust and wide-ranging review of the available literature, as well as conversations with experts in the field.¹ Our research agenda is structured around the three pillars identified above: addressing immediate crises of violence, identifying and addressing the underlying causes of violence, and promoting effective police investigations to solve violent crime. Within each pillar, we prioritize research objectives and questions that we believe are most directly responsive to the core concerns of decisionmakers and the communities they serve and have the potential for significant impact on policy and practice.

Research Pillar 1: *Address immediate crises of violence*

When violence surges, such as the record increase in homicides in 2020, policymakers must meet an urgent demand both to explain and solve the immediate crisis of violence in their community. Yet, the complexity of the problem of violence, limited capacity for comprehensive problem analysis, and absence of a more robust body of evidence on what works to reduce violence, continues to leave mayors, law enforcement, and community leaders struggling to diagnose the particular drivers of violence afflicting a given locale as well as identify which interventions to pursue in what contexts.

High-quality problem analyses and program evaluations are thus essential to increasing knowledge and shaping policy and practice to address emergent violence, and our first research pillar thus focuses on meeting this need. The research objectives and questions prioritized emphasize the importance of not only assessing what interventions work to reduce violence, but also the key role of the “*how*”—how a jurisdiction identifies its problem of violence, how it selects an intervention, how it designs and implements that approach—in attaining the core goal of violence reduction. With a focus on near-term solutions, we aim to support decisionmakers (e.g., police, community leaders, and mayors) as they navigate this challenging policy landscape. To inform our efforts to address crises of violence, we set forth the following research objectives and illustrative research questions:

Research Pillar 1 Objectives

- **Objective 1.1: Improve problem identification to inform the design and implementation of violence reduction strategies.** For example, how can cities effectively identify high-risk people and places to focus their violence reduction efforts and resources? How do patterns of violence shape individual and community-level behavior?
- **Objective 1.2: Improve the design, implementation, and efficacy of violence reduction interventions.** For example, does a given intervention program reduce violence and improve community safety? What outcomes are achieved by the intervention (e.g., violence reduction, health care, employment, affordable housing, improved mental health, etc.)? Through what mechanisms do these programs reduce violence? Are there differential effects based on age, baseline risk of involvement in violence, location, or other factors? What are the key components of the intervention (e.g., programmatic, staffing) associated with positive outcomes?



Research Pillar 2: *Identify and address the underlying causes of violence.*

Notwithstanding decades of research that has tended to focus on single-cause explanations, the causes of violence are not well understood, with explanations varying from the size of police forces to population age distribution, to employment rates, to even the legal status of abortion.² The demand for better answers comes at a time of significant advances in data and methods, including data from multiple sectors and methods that more accurately model violence as a complex epidemiological phenomenon. Building on these advances to address this significant gap in the field is not only a matter of academic interest, but also has *direct* implications for policy and practice. This line of research aims to improve problem analyses and interventions to address emergent violence, as well as guide the development of more effective, longer-term policy solutions. The research we anticipate supporting under this goal should be grounded in existing evidence, yet have the potential to be transformative and paradigm-shifting, to facilitate a leap forward in knowledge and practice.³ To guide our efforts to identify and address the underlying causes of violence, we set forth the following research objectives and illustrative research questions:

Research Pillar 2 Objectives

- **Objective 2.1: Deepen our understanding of how violence emerges and why it rises and falls to inform long-term policy and practice and systemic change.** For example, how does violence emerge? Why does violence rise or fall? What can be done to end waves of violence in a sustainable manner? What is the relationship between policing, police legitimacy and community trust, and community violence?
 - **Objective 2.2: Evaluate the efficacy of multicomponent, multilevel interventions that target the root causes of violence.** For example, does the multicomponent, multilevel intervention reduce violence and build community safety? If so, is the effect on violence reduction and community safety outcomes significantly larger than that of individual intervention components? How long do effects persist? What outcomes are achieved?
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Research Pillar 3: *Promote effective police investigations to solve violent crime.*

Though the scope of police work has expanded significantly in recent decades, crime solving remains at the core of effective policing. Understanding what factors promote effective police investigation and crime solving, often measured by clearance rates, is the third pillar of our research agenda. With homicide clearance rates dropping to a historic low in 2020 of 54%, we seek to understand why cases are not being solved and what factors can increase case clearance.⁴

Since the RAND Corporation published a landmark study on investigations in the 1970s, there has been a widely held belief among researchers and police practitioners that organizational factors, human resources, and investigative effort matter little to solving crimes. Yet, research supported in part by Arnold Ventures has since shown that the variation between the homicide clearances in agencies can be explained by case attributes, investigative practices, and organizational

differences.⁵ It is also true that “clearance rates” as an area of research is not well-developed, and a large amount of the existing research focuses exclusively on homicide clearances. Today, experts suggest that there may be additional research opportunities to improve clearance rates on a variety of crime types through management, training, policies, and technology. Further, researchers and practitioners alike recognize the integral role that members of the community play in successfully clearing cases.⁶ Unfortunately, the existing research provides only a limited understanding of the community engagement practices that are most effective in building trust and improving cooperation in crime-solving efforts. To understand how to promote effective police investigations to solve violent crime, we set forth the following research objectives and illustrative key research questions:

Research Pillar 3 Objectives

- **Objective 3.1: Improve investigative efforts.** For example, how do we define, document, and measure investigative effort? What skills, practices, techniques, and decision-making characterize an effective investigator? How do we quantify these factors?
 - **Objective 3.2: Identify the organizational factors involved with successful investigative efforts.** For example, what organizational elements facilitate or impede investigative efforts and contribute to successful investigative outcomes?
 - **Objective 3.3: Improve the role of the community in investigative efforts.** For example, what is the relationship between community characteristics, police actions and attitudes, and investigative success? What are the conditions that hinder or promote witness cooperation (e.g., police attitudes and conduct, views of police legitimacy, witness intimidation, adherence to unwritten “no snitching” customs)?
 - **Objective 3.4: Examine new frameworks for investigations.** For example, how does a proactive, problem-solving investigative framework—in which detectives investigate and target places, problems, crime patterns or networks, rather than individual crimes/suspects—affect investigative outcomes? What is the role of patrol officers in investigations? How is investigative success measured beyond case clearance?
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SUMMARY

Addressing community violence and improving community safety is one of the most critical social issues facing the United States. The limited evidence available to support policy and practice to reduce violence demands the focused attention that this agenda aims to catalyze.

The increase in violent crime and demand for action has ushered in a new era in the availability of resources to address this critical social issue.⁷ Through these efforts, states, counties, and cities will have an extraordinary increase in funding that is available to support violence reduction efforts. We aim to build on these efforts, to learn from the impressive work already underway and translate this tremendous learning opportunity into a set of findings that can continue to inform, support, and advance the field – and save lives.

ENDNOTES

1. Through various grants the Policing Team collaborated with experts at the John Jay College Research and Evaluation Center, Dr. Caterina Roman of Temple University, Dr. Shani Buggs at University of California, Davis, Dr. Daniel Webster at Johns Hopkins University, Dr. Joseph Richardson at the University of Maryland, College Park, and Dr. Cynthia Lum and Dr. Chris Koper at George Mason University’s Center for Evidence- Based Crime Policy to survey the relevant literature and identify pressing research questions. We are also thankful for the ongoing input of key practitioners to better understand the core dimensions of the problem of violence and promising solutions.
2. Thompson, D. (2021, March 24). [Why America’s Great Crime Decline is Over](#). *The Atlantic*.
3. Our planned approach is inspired by the [National Institutes of Health \(NIH\) Common Fund’s](#) Transformative Research to Address Health Disparities and Advance Health Equity [initiative](#), which supports “innovative and paradigm shifting science” to “end structural racism and racial inequities throughout the biomedical enterprise.” The initiative invests in efforts to “1) foster the development, testing, and dissemination of innovative interventions focused on elimination of health disparities broadly and in high priority areas, and 2) increase the competitiveness of investigators and the research base dedicated to health disparities research at minority serving institutions.” The challenges this initiative is designed to address in medicine and health mirror those we observe in efforts to reduce community violence. We do not expect our efforts will overcome centuries of concentrated disinvestment and end inequality; however, we look to support research that makes significant progress in identifying and assessing feasible, mid-term solutions.
4. Li, Weihua & Lartey, Jamiles. (12 Jan 2022). [As Murders Spiked, Police Solved About Half in 2020](#). *The Marshall Project*.
5. Wellford, C., Lum, C., Scott, T., & Vovak, H. (2019). [Clearing Homicides: Role of organizational, case, and investigative dimensions](#). *Criminology & Public Policy*, 18(2), 553-600.

6. Ibid.
7. Department of Justice. (2021, September 24). [Justice Department Awards Nearly \\$187 Million to Support Community Safety](#) [Press release], The White House. (2021, December 14). [Fact Sheet: Highlights from The Biden Administration's Historic Efforts to Reduce Gun Violence](#).

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