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IDEAS | ESSAY

To Cut Urban Bloodshed, Focus on Violent Hot Spots

By targeting the limited number of people and places involved in most killings, new anticrime programs can have a huge effect

By Thomas Abt
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Hospital emergency rooms run on the principle of triage. Patients with life-threatening injuries get immediate attention, while those in less grave danger wait their turn. Doctors and nurses routinely treat deadly gunshot and stab wounds first—but as a society, we don't do the same for urban violence.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, hundreds of Americans have died in terrorist attacks and mass shootings, but more than 100,000 have perished on the streets of our cities. Urban violence accounts for most murders in the U.S., but politicians focus on everything except the violence itself, instead issuing sweeping calls to ban guns, legalize drugs or end poverty.

In a 2016 paper, my colleague Christopher Winship and I analyzed reviews of more than 1,400 studies on anti-violence programs around the world. We discovered that urban violence is sticky, meaning that it tends to cluster among a surprisingly small number of people and places. In New Orleans, for instance, a tiny network of less than 1% of the city's population accounted for more than half of its lethal incidents between Jan. 1, 2010, and March 31, 2014. In Boston, more than 70% of all shootings between 1980 and 2008 were concentrated in less than 5% of the city's geography. In almost every city, a few "hot people" and "hot spots" are responsible for the vast majority of deadly violence; the key to addressing the problem is to pay close attention to them.

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The surprising good news is that if we focus on urban violence, we can have peace in our streets in a matter of years, without waiting for sweeping new laws or massive budget hikes. Targeted programs can produce transformative results.

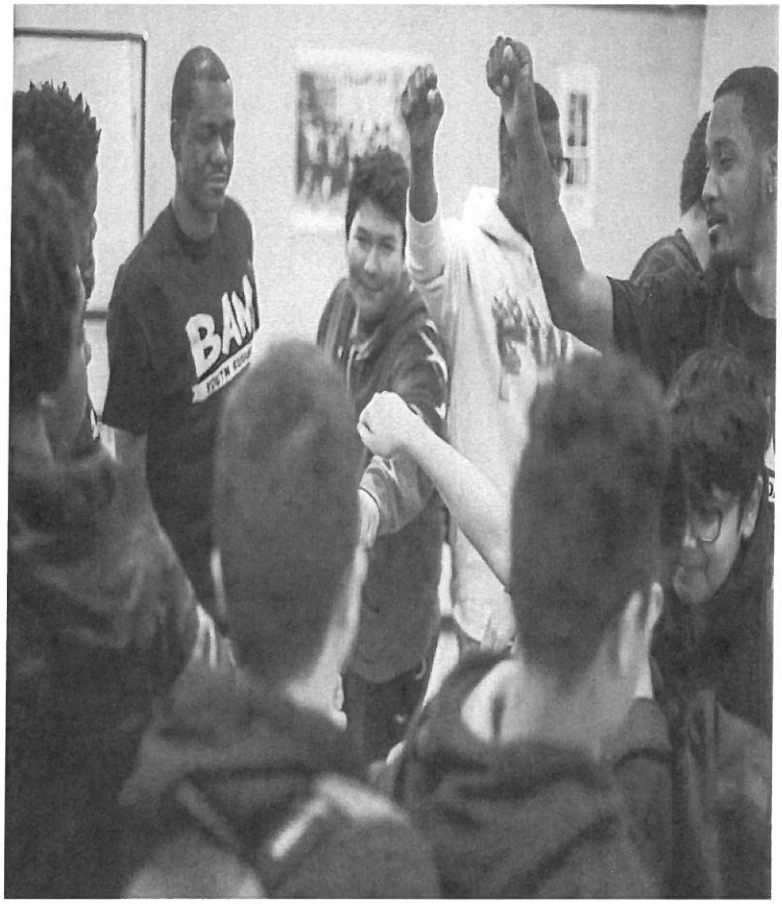
Consider Oakland, Calif., where analysts in 2012-13 reviewed 18 months of homicide data and discovered that only some 400 individuals—about 0.1% of Oakland's population—were at the highest risk for violence at any particular time.

Knowing this, a group of community members, social-service providers and law-enforcement officials began meeting in small groups with these individuals, telling them that their community wanted them to stay alive and keep out of prison but that the shooting had to stop. These interveners followed up by providing life coaching, job training, educational opportunities and other forms of assistance, along with narrowly targeted investigations, arrests and prosecutions for those who persisted in committing violent offenses. Last year, independent evaluators from Northeastern University determined that the initiative—called Oakland Ceasefire—had cut the homicide rate in the city nearly in half since 2012, when the effort was launched.

Oakland Ceasefire is modeled on Operation Ceasefire, a 1990s Boston police initiative also known as the Group Violence Reduction Strategy. The approach was credited at the time with reducing youth homicides in Boston by more than 60% in just two years. It has since lowered group-related or total homicides in Indianapolis, New Haven and Cincinnati by more than a third.

A 2018 paper in the journal Criminology & Public Policy found that the strategy has produced positive results in all of the 12 cases where it has been rigorously studied. Each time, partnerships between the police and the community confronted those at the highest risk of violence with a double message of empathy and accountability—saying, in effect, "We are here to help you. If you won't let us, we are here to stop you."

In Chicago, the "Becoming a Man" program run by the nonprofit Youth Guidance combines sports, training in the values of responsible manhood, and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to help at-risk young men achieve their full potential. Between 2009 and 2015, researchers from the University of Chicago pored over data to identify almost 5,000 middle- and high-school students in some of the city's toughest schools who were missing or flunking classes, being suspended or getting held back. Once a week, these young men were excused from classes to participate in group CBT counseling sessions. For one group of 2,740 students, arrests for violent crime fell by



Young men come together to open up and share feelings in the 'Becoming a Man' program, Bogan Computer Technical High School, Chicago, November 2018. **PHOTO:** YOUTH GUIDANCE

44% after one year; for a second group of 2,064, violent arrests were reduced by 50% after two years, according to a 2017 study in the Quarterly Journal of Economics.

Cognitive behavioral therapy has been used for decades to help patients with addiction, anxiety and depression, but applying it to criminality and violence is new—and promising. The premise: If flawed thinking leads to aggressive or antisocial behavior, then changing that thinking can prevent it. A systematic review by the Campbell Collaboration, a social-science research group, indicates that CBT treatment can reduce criminal recidivism by as much as 50%, especially for the few individuals most likely to commit a crime.

Another promising approach can be seen in Camden, N.J., once ranked as the country's most dangerous city. In 2013, the overwhelmed police department was disbanded and rebuilt. Since then, Camden's police have reduced violence while building trust—embracing community engagement, conflict de-escalation and a "scoop and go" policy that requires officers to drive gunshot victims to the hospital themselves if an ambulance will take too long. In a major cultural shift, Camden's cops are focused on

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being "guardians, not warriors" to better serve their community. In 2012, the city suffered 67 murders, an all-time high; last year, there were 22—less than a third of the 2012 total.

To achieve long-term progress against urban violence, policy makers can put together a small portfolio of such programs. The best anti-violence efforts use social networking and crime mapping, among other tools, to focus on the people and places in greatest need. They balance enforcement with prevention and strive to be seen as fair and legitimate by the communities most afflicted by violence and the social costs of arrests and incarceration.

By my estimates, bringing these principles and programs together in a coordinated way could reduce homicide rates in U.S. cities by 10% a year. And that number is probably conservative: Just one of these strategies by itself can cut violence in a city by more than 10%. Added up over eight years—that is, two mayoral or presidential terms—such reductions could cut the number of homicides in half. If Chicago fully embraced such an effort in 2020, by 2028, almost 1,300 murders would be prevented in total. If such programs were implemented across America's 40 most violent cities, a total of more than 12,000 lives would be saved. Better still: These tightly targeted efforts would be relatively inexpensive, costing a fraction of a percent of local and federal budgets.

It may be hard to believe that such allegedly intractable problems can be solved, but the evidence doesn't equivocate. Metaphorically speaking, whether the patient is a young man suffering from a gunshot wound, a community riddled with such injuries or a nation filled with such communities, the treatment should be the same: First and foremost, stop the bleeding.

—Mr. Abt is a senior research fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. This essay is adapted from his new book, "Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence—and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets," published by Basic Books.