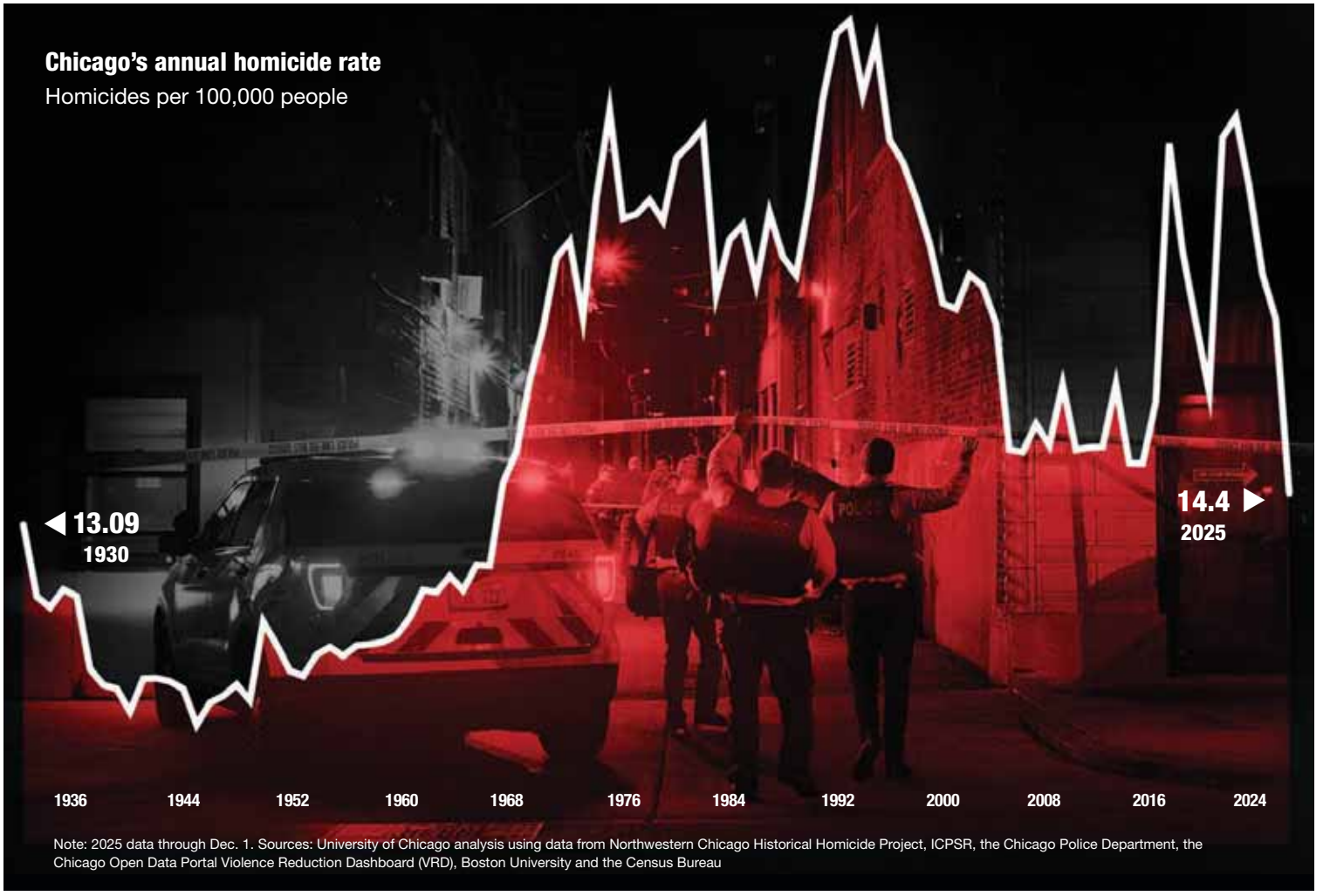

Note: 2025 data through Dec. 1. Sources: University of Chicago analysis using data from Northwestern Chicago Historical Homicide Project, ICPSR, the Chicago Police Department, the Chicago Open Data Portal Violence Reduction Dashboard (VRD), Boston University and the Census Bureau

CHICAGO VIOLENCE TAKES A TURN

'A CONFLUENCE OF FACTORS' APPEARS TO BE DRIVING A HISTORIC DROP IN VIOLENT CRIME IN 2025

By Steve Hendershot

By the numbers, 2025 is shaping up to be Chicago's safest year in decades. As quickly and unexpectedly as crime and violence surged during the pandemic, they receded this year — and not just to pre-pandemic levels, but to historic ones.

Chicago homicides, which hit a 10-year high in 2021, are on pace to reach the lowest total since the mid-1960s. Violent crime in general, which reached a 10-year high in 2023, is also likely to record a 10-year low in 2025, according to an analysis of the city's Violence Reduction Dashboard conducted by the University of Chicago Crime Lab. Robbery, too, is down sharply.

The declines are worth celebrating. They're also a bit jarring and hard to make sense of — both because they follow so closely on the heels of the pandemic crime wave and because the city continued this year to fall prey to the sort of high-profile crime that suggests violence and disorder still aren't fully under control. When a city's signature holiday kickoff event is marred by a mass shooting, as happened during a "teen takeover" in front of the Chicago Theatre on State Street in the Loop on Nov. 21, the day of the annual Christmas tree lighting, it seems premature to plan a victory parade.

To that point, Chicago Police Superintendent Larry Snelling says, "In this line of work, you never spike the football."

Perhaps not, but it's still appropriate to note the progress and to try to build on it. Snelling and other civic leaders can take stock of what's working while also acknowledging the work that remains.

"This is not some 'mission accomplished' moment, but it is literally making history. The progress is remarkable," says Arne Duncan, managing director of community violence intervention (CVI) nonprofit Chicago CRED and former U.S. secretary of education.

Identifying the most important factors contributing to the decline is essential to charting a successful path forward, because directing resources toward effective strategies is likely key to sustaining momentum, experts say.

It's also really difficult.

"For anybody right now who is injected with truth serum and asked, 'What exactly is going on?,' the honest answer is we don't really know for sure," says Jens Ludwig, Pritzker director of the U of C's Crime Lab.

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Theories range from broad social and cultural shifts (for example, kids these days don't spend as much unstructured time together, which means fewer opportunities to get into trouble) to evolving law enforcement strategies and community interventions. Adding to the complexity is the fact that murder and violence in general have declined across the country. The gains in most places are not as dramatic as in Chicago, but the national trends make it hard to give too much credit to any particular local initiative.

"It's a confluence of factors, and it's very hard to tease out (discrete impacts) because they're moving together," says Robert Sampson, a Harvard University professor and former president of the American Society of Criminology, who has extensively studied crime patterns in Chicago.

That said, experts say a few aspects of violence prevention efforts in Chicago feel different — and better — than in past years. Public safety trends can change quickly and mysteriously, but these factors seem capable of making a sustained, positive impact.

Factor #1: Law enforcement is benefiting from more data, better technology and improved operations.

As the number of Chicago police officers dwindled during the pandemic (from more than 13,000 in 2019 to about 11,500 now), the department, like others across the country, had to get creative to address the era's public safety challenges. Those adjustments included "having to be more deliberate with the way that they deploy officers and how they use them," says Kenneth Corey, former chief of the New York City Police Department and now director of outreach and engagement for the Chicago-based Policing Leadership Academy.

In Chicago, that evolving data-driven approach includes anticipating hotspots and identifying trends in criminal behavior.

Chicago's police department is better able to "look at patterns and to dig into those patterns when it comes to shootings, robberies, gang conflicts, burglaries, you name it," Snelling says.

The department has built a network of Strategic Decision Support Centers in recent years to bolster those efforts, including one focused on the Chicago Transit Authority that launched this year. Corey says the shift toward data-driven deployment decisions is helping drive the reductions in crime and violence nationally, and it's especially well-suited to Chicago, a city where violence has historically been concentrated in a few specific neighborhoods.

Through Dec. 9, Chicago had experienced 395 homicides this year, 376 fewer than the same point in 2021. The majority of that improvement came from just 10 of Chicago's 77 community areas. Through Dec. 9 those neighborhoods, located on the South and West sides, had 216 fewer homicides than they did in the same period in 2021, according to Chicago's Violence Reduction Dashboard. The gains were much more modest across the rest of the city.

"When you can focus your resources," Corey says, "you're going to get outsized results."

Chicago police are also embracing technology to help solve crimes, as are their counterparts across the country. In April, the department was recognized for leading the nation in submissions to a ballistic imaging service operated by the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms that quickly links guns to shooting incidents.

It's impossible to quantify the crimes prevented, but one sign of CPD's improved efficacy is the uptick in its homicide clearance rate. In 2024, the city posted a 56% clearance rate, its best since 2015 — and in late August, the year-to-date clearance rate reached 77%, according to the mayor's office.

There's a flywheel effect when serial violent offenders are arrested and convicted, because while in custody they're unable to commit additional crimes within their communities. That means improved clearance rates and stronger forensic evidence can pay enhanced public safety dividends.

"When you take the most violent people out of circulation, your numbers are going to drop. That's just common sense," says Cook County State's Attorney Eileen O'Neill Burke.

Burke is making it a point of emphasis to keep those serial offenders off the streets. She is pushing for pretrial detention in violent crime cases more often than her predecessor, Kim Foxx, according to the state's attorney's office. Burke's office asked for detention in 39% of such cases compared to 38% for Foxx, and 80% of those requests were granted by a judge, compared to 70% under Foxx. Burke attributes the higher success rate to several operational changes, including embedding additional investigators in first appearance hearings, gaining access to files from juvenile and domestic relations court cases, and assigning more experienced attorneys to detention hearings. Her office also now has someone embedded within the ATF-operated ballistics effort, called the Crime Gun Intelligence Center.

Burke's office also announced a policy to seek prison time in cases in which arrestees carry guns with machine-gun conversion switches, and in November she announced the citywide expansion of a plan to enable officers to file certain felony gun charges without prosecutor approval.

Burke's policies "deserve some of the credit" for the decline in violent crime, says Ald. Bill Conway, 34th, a former assistant state's attorney, and "seem to have some deterrence value."

Additionally, the overall relationship between Chicago police under Snelling and the state's attorney's office under Burke is much stronger than in prior years. They both cited it as a driver of improved performance, specifically pointing to new training developed by Burke's office that she says is intended to function "like a master's degree in trial work" for detectives, ensuring that the evidence collected by police translates to stronger cases for prosecutors at trial.

Snelling assumed the police superintendent post in late 2023; Burke was elected the following year. Before that, "a very antagonistic relationship had developed between the state's attorney's office and the police," Burke says. "We needed to have a working relationship."

That insight led to a series of meetings between the offices. The new training programs were among the outcomes, as well as the improved tenor that Burke sought. Snelling calls the current relationship between police and prosecutors "tremendous."

Factor #2: CPD is engaging differently, including working with CVI groups.

The shift in Chicago policing tactics isn't limited to technology. Officers have also substantially changed the way they're interacting with community members, perhaps especially in the areas of the city that have experienced the most violence in the past.

"You could call the (new) approach to policing kinder or gentler, but I think I'd say more professional," says Corey. "They are not trying to enforce the law by force anymore, right? You're really trying to get community buy-in. You're really trying to build relationships."

People on Chicago's streets are noticing the difference — even those conditioned to expect otherwise because they came up in an era when "they just expected to have the (crap) beat out of them by the police because this constant harassment took place all the time," says Harvard's Sampson.

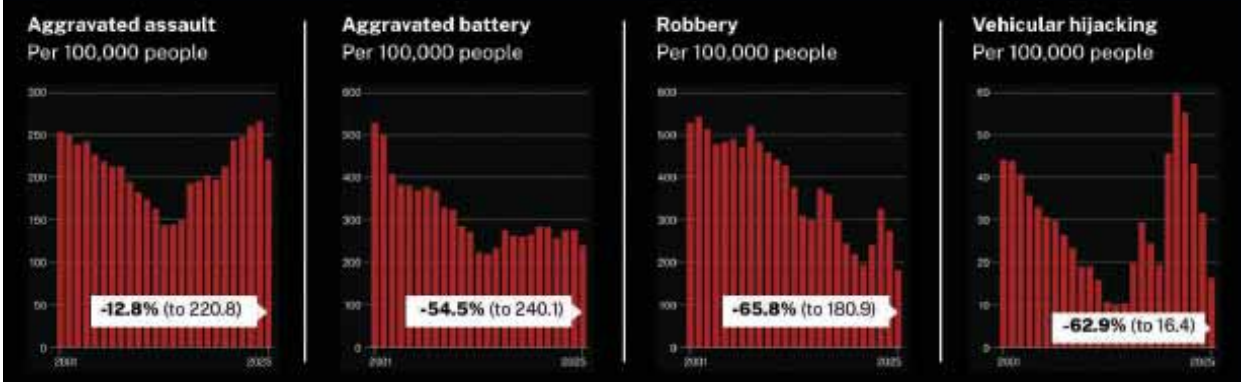
Cedric Hawkins, strategic initiatives manager at Chicago CRED, had a very different view of Chicago police while growing up on the Far South Side.

"I actually thought I hated them," he says.

Now, after several years of engaging with police as part of his vi-

Other violent crimes declined, too

Most violent crime categories, including these four, saw declines in 2025 vs. 2001, though criminal sexual assaults ticked up 1.5% over last year.



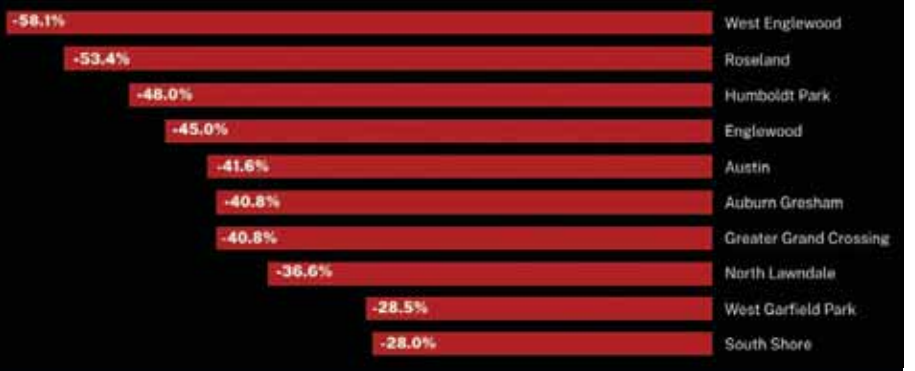
Note: Data collapsed to the incident level (e.g., a shooting incident with three gunshot victims is counted as a single incident). VRD data covers Jan. 1 to Dec. 1 of each year. The city's "Crimes 2001-Present" data covers Jan. 1 to Nov. 25 of each year. 2025 data are estimates.

Sources: University of Chicago analysis of Chicago Open Data Portal VRD data and "Crimes 2001-Present" data, Census Bureau Decennial Surveys, 1-year ACS data

GETTY IMAGES

Decreases in shootings per 100,000 people

For the communities with the most shootings in 2024



Note: Data collapsed to the incident level (e.g., a shooting incident with three gunshot victims is counted as a single incident). VRD data covers Jan. 1 to Dec. 1 of each year.

Sources: University of Chicago analysis of Chicago Open Data Portal VRD data and U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Surveys, 5-year ACS data

olence-prevention work, he's noticed a change. Instead of pushing for maximal confrontation, officers are taking a different tack. Hawkins cited one example where an officer confiscated a gun but didn't arrest the youth found in possession, and another where an officer called Hawkins and asked him to intervene on a corner where officers had spotted several youths with guns.

"You got CPD starting to engage with you," says Hawkins. "They're trying to gain trust."

A big reason why Chicago often leads the nation in raw number of homicides is that there are only two larger cities, Los Angeles and New York, and both have been uncommonly successful among American cities at preventing homicide. Part of that success is due to how "those police forces really embraced community policing and constitutional policing," says Ald. Conway. "Chicago didn't do that as much, but fortunately we hopefully are going in a better direction in that regard now."

Snelling hopes so. "We're work-

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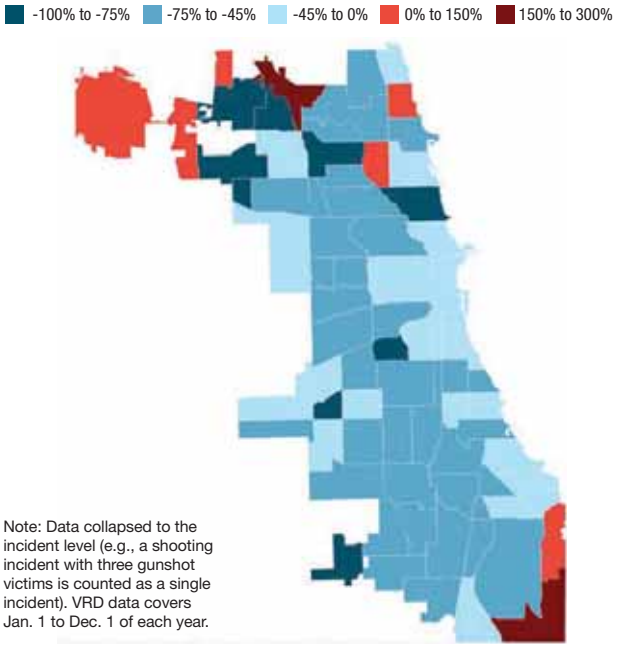
Number of gunshot victims drops citywide

The vast majority of Chicago communities saw the number of shooting victims decrease in 2025, in some cases dramatically.

2025 change in the number of people who were shot vs. 2020-2024 average



Note: Data collapsed to the incident level (e.g., a shooting incident with three gunshot victims is counted as a single incident). VRD data covers Jan. 1 to Dec. 1 of each year.

Source: University of Chicago analysis of Chicago Open Data Portal Violence Reduction Dashboard data

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ing differently now," he says. "When you start to build trust in communities, it's a lot more effective."

One sign of that progress is that violence is falling without a corresponding spike in the number of arrests or significant growth in the incarcerated population.

The number of arrests in Chicago has ticked up in recent years, but that's after decades of precipitous decline. Snelling says under his leadership the police department is focused on arrests related to violent crime compared to drug charges. The city is on pace for about 57,000 arrests this year, according to data from the city's Office of the Inspector General, up from about 53,000 in 2024 but below the roughly 305,000 in 1995, 238,000 in 2005, and 85,000 in 2016, according to police department annual reports. (The department didn't release annual reports for six years during the 2010s.) And the state of Illinois' prison population has remained at about 30,000 for several years, down from almost 50,000 in 2012.

"That's the sweet spot, fewer arrests along with less and less violence," says CRED's Duncan. "With the combination of the two, this is the best place that we've been in."

The CPD vibe shift also extends to officers' relationship with CVI workers like Hawkins. Historically, those groups have sometimes viewed one another with distrust, a dynamic Snelling likens to entering into a marriage expecting the other person to be unfaithful.

"If we're going to move forward," he says, "we have to trust each other to get it done."

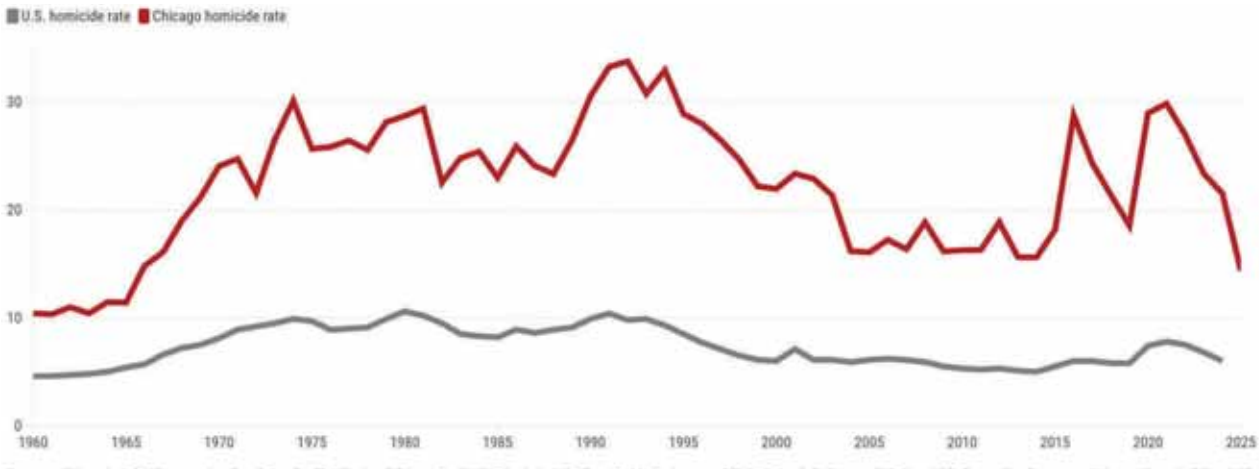
Accordingly, police and CVI workers are now coordinating efforts to prevent violence in hotspot areas and in traditionally violent times such as summer holiday weekends. Gradually, trust is building.

"There's a professional understanding," says Andrew Papachristos, faculty director of Northwestern University's Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research & Science (Corners). "There's not the sort of antagonism that there has been historically."

Crime declines across the nation

While Chicago's homicide rate is higher than the national average, the change in its rate mirrors that of the nation with both spiking during the COVID-19 pandemic and dropping off in 2025.

Homicides per 100,000 people



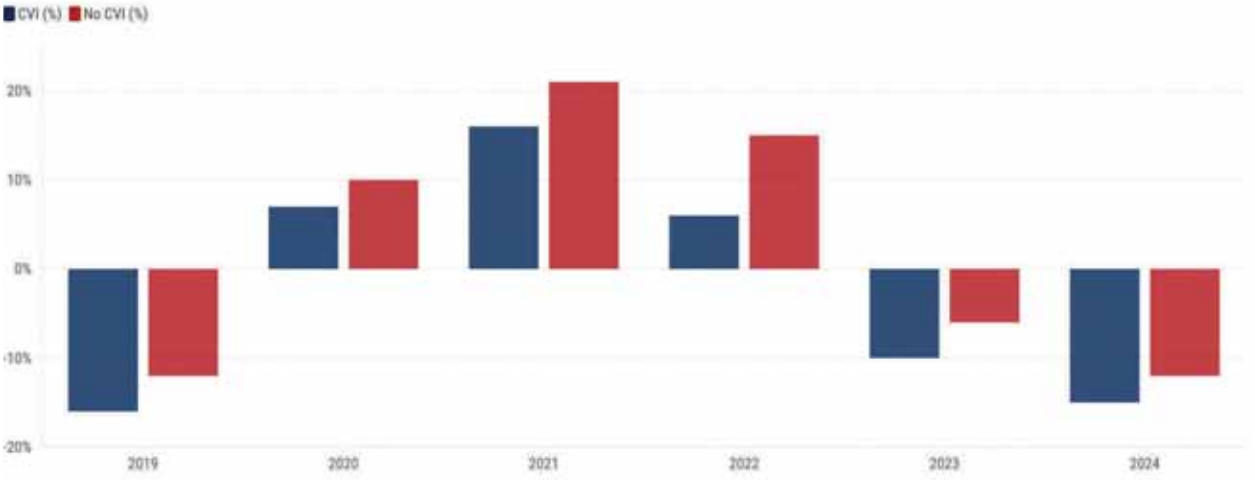
Sources: University of Chicago using data from the CDC National Center for Health Statistics, D.L. Eckberg's "Estimates of Early Twentieth-Century U.S. Homicide Rates," Northwestern Chicago Historical Homicide Project, ICPSR, the Chicago Police Department, the Chicago Open Data Portal Violence Reduction Dashboard, Boston University and the Census Bureau

Note: National data from 2024 is provisional and queried on Dec. 3, 2025. Chicago data is from Jan. 1 through Dec. 1.

Community counts

Chicago communities that utilized community violence intervention programs outperformed areas that didn't incorporate CVI measures.

Year-over-year change in the three-year shooting average, per 100,000 people



Source: Northwestern Institute for Policy Research

Factor #3: Chicago's CVI programs are approaching a tipping point.

CVI is a field that relies on outreach from community members to prevent violence. Many of its workers, like Hawkins, are formerly incarcerated people who can relate to the conflicts, temptations and dynamics that can drive community violence. Their job is to anticipate those conflicts early and defuse them, including by scanning the social media accounts of teens and knowing which emojis suggest trouble is brewing.

A decade ago, Chicago's CVI infrastructure lagged behind that of other big cities such as Los Angeles, but now it's well-developed. Duncan's CRED started in 2016, and several peer organizations, including the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago, Metropolitan Family Services' Metropolitan Peace Initiatives, and Heartland Alliance's READI Chicago, all launched around the same time.

A decade later, not only have those programs matured operationally, but they've also seen their message take root. More than 600 people have completed Metropolitan Peace Initiatives' Metropolitan Peace Academy, which includes intensive training for outreach workers and case managers.

And people who might otherwise resort to violence are increasingly being convinced not to.

"We've hit that point where (gangs and people in conflict have) bought into 'Let's play defense' " instead of initiating conflict, says Sam Castro, director of strategic initiatives and partnerships at the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago. "We're changing the way they process things, and then it goes from saying, 'I'm going to play defense' to 'I don't gotta play at all' at some point."

Results have followed. A study by Northwestern's Corners showed the neighborhoods with CVI saw fewer shootings during the pandemic-era surge than those without, and the gains in those communities are also more pronounced now that the frequency of shootings is declining.

"The outreach community as a workforce is a lot more stable today, and they're able to do more sustained work," says Vaughn Bryant, executive director of Metropolitan Peace Initiatives.

CVI's success has also attracted funding, including 2024 commitments of $175 million from the state of Illinois and $100 million from Chicago's business community. That begets even more stability. As with changes in policing tactics and capabilities, CVI programs are expanding in cities across the country, and declining violence in those cities is helping drive the national decrease in homicides, according to the Council on Criminal Justice in Washington, D.C. But the influx of funding in Chicago is unique and positions the city as an emerging CVI leader.

"I can't sit here today and say that we have hit that tipping point, but I think we are closer to it," says Duncan. "We're moving away from the vicious cycle and moving toward the virtuous cycle."

Chicago has a long way to go to ensure that every city resident is safe and secure. The gains made in 2025 don't constitute a finish line, but they do provide an opportunity to identify and build on what's working — even as experts preach ongoing vigilance.

"It is a different climate," says Bryant, comparing the gains this year to the pandemic-era surges in crime and homicide. "But we all know that violence is a finicky thing."

What could be behind Chicago becoming less violent

By Steve Hendershot

The reason for a rise or fall in violent crime "is never just one thing," says Northwestern University professor Andrew Papachristos, who researches social and behavioral aspects of gun violence. "It's the whole jumble."

While local leaders point to some programs and tactics that seem to be contributing to recent declines in homicides and violent crime, the trend also likely is influenced by additional factors — some completely outside the control of city leaders and their nonprofit partners.

Here's a look at a few of the other possible drivers.

Pandemic-era psychological distress contributed to a surge in violence that has since receded.

The pandemic was bad for mental health, especially among the young people who are responsible for much of the gun violence. In a June 2020 survey by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 62.9% of 18- to 24-year-olds reported experiencing anxiety or depressive disorder, and 25.5% said they had seriously considered suicide within the previous 30 days. That level of distress and existential ambivalence could lead to rash decision-making in a conflict.

"If you've got 1 in 4 18- to 24-year-olds basically saying, 'I don't (care) about my own life,' then you can sort of imagine how that is going to shape their interaction with other people, right?" says Jens Ludwig, Pritzker director of the University of Chicago Crime Lab and author of the 2025 book "Unforgiving Places: The Unexpected Origins of American Gun Violence."

Subsequent federal pandemic-relief funding enabled social institutions to function at peak levels.

During the worst of the pandemic, "all of our institutions of social control basically just stopped," says Ludwig. When those institutions returned, they did so "because the federal government pushed a huge amount of cash into cities around the country."

The resulting influx of funding not only affected efforts that directly addressed crime and violence, but also provided jobs, led to community improvements and boosted auxiliary programs that support the younger population.

Now "one of the big open questions is, what happens next in a world in which all of that pandemic-relief money goes away?" says Ludwig.

Open-air drug markets tied to the opioid crisis propped up violence and masked a larger positive trend.

Property crime and violent crime usually track along parallel paths but began to trend in opposite directions around 2014. Property crime continued to decline, but violence did not.

What propped up violence during this era? One factor could be the fentanyl crisis and the open-air drug markets that attended it. According to research from James Tuttle, an assistant professor at the University of Montana and author of the 2025 book "Crime Wave," the annual change in the murder rate began to mirror the drug overdose rate around the same time that murder and property crime diverged.

"A lot of people were exchanging illicit drugs, and drug markets tend to fuel violence," says Tuttle.

Kids today don't spend as much unstructured time together, leading to fewer crimes.

Whether it's because they're on their phones, playing video games, being helicopter-parented, or were shut in during the pandemic, today's kids don't spend as much time with one another in unstructured situations. There are positives and negatives to this, and one positive may be fewer opportunities to get into criminal mischief.

"Some of the behaviors that they engage in are more prosocial," says Ernesto Lopez, senior research specialist with the Washington, D.C.-based Council on Criminal Justice. "It's basically a less risky lifestyle than we've seen with juveniles" in the past.

It's difficult to isolate the effect here on crime and violence, but researchers have attempted to do so indirectly using corollaries. Tuttle, for example, showed that pregnancies among 15- to 19-year-olds have trended sharply downward over the last 15 years, and have closely followed similar declines in the burglary and robbery arrest rates for youths in the same age cohort.

The ICE effect.

U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement's Operation Midway Blitz in Chicago this fall was one of several federal interventions in American cities during 2025, alongside deployments in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and Memphis, Tenn. Crime data analyst Jeff Asher, who co-founded New Orleans-based AH Datalytics, which operates the Real-Time Crime Index, found that shootings declined during the federal interventions in D.C. and Memphis.

In Chicago, however, Asher's analysis found little evidence that the federal presence accentuated the decrease in violence that already was well-established. For example, the number of shooting victims in Chicago was down 36% from the beginning of the year through late November, when Asher conducted his analysis. During Operation Midway Blitz, the decline increased only slightly, to 37%. The number of robberies increased during the operation, and murders (down 29% compared to 2024) were unchanged.

Despite the year-after-year declines in major crimes, shootings such as the one that killed one person and wounded eight others following the lighting of the city's Christmas tree in Millennium Park are a reminder that the city too often is still a scary place. | GETTY IMAGES

Chicagoans aren't ready yet to celebrate the big drop in violence

Will Johnson *is the Chicago-based CEO of Outward Intelligence, an AI-powered quantitative research company.*

Outward Intelligence

Something remarkable has happened in Chicago this year: After falling broadly in 2024, reports of major crimes dropped to pre-pandemic levels, while murder rates declined at double the overall decrease in big cities to the lowest summertime total since 1965.

The sharp turn for the better hasn't eliminated public fears about safety, however. Nor has it translated into broad public support for Mayor Brandon Johnson, who has credited the reduction in gun violence to preventive efforts he's championed such as expanded mental health and social services and youth employment programs.

Asked if they feel safe in Chicago, two-thirds of representative respondents in a recent poll we conducted answered that, on the contrary, they're afraid, with three-quarters saying they're somewhat or very fearful outside their own neighborhoods. Even on their own block, 23% said they feel unsafe, and 1 in 6 said they're scared in their own home.

Nearly 70% of Chicago residents view Johnson's handling of crime negatively, with a significant 43% rating his performance as poor. And while a third favor increasing spending on violence intervention programs to make the city safer, bigger numbers break with the mayor and want stricter sentencing for violent criminals (59%) and more police (44%).

This isn't the only time we've seen a perception gap in public opinion and factual evidence. On the economy, for another example, polls broadly have been showing that many Americans believe the economy is essentially in a recession, even as the unemployment rate remains low, consumer spending is up and stock market indexes are at near-record highs.

One reason: People can be influenced by anecdotes, hearsay and memories more than by data from even reputable sources. And crime is scarring. In our poll, 1 in 5 Chicagoans say a family member has been a crime victim over the previous five years. As Marj Halperin, a Democratic political analyst, recently told Axios, "Stats can show crime is down, but if something happens on your block, neighbors will feel like crime is up."

Still, the public mood in Chicago is shifting, if belatedly. Five years ago, when Chicago was shaken by the pandemic lockdown and coincident protests and outbursts of violence, public safety was the No. 1 issue, cited by 98% of poll respondents. In mid-2025, public safety was still the citizenry's biggest concern, but their concerns about crime had slid to 62%.

Today, optimists outnumber pessimists. A quarter of city residents say Chicago has become safer since 2020 and will continue on this peaceable path over the next five years, versus 20% who say crime is more rampant today and will be tomorrow, too.

There's good news in this poll for Johnson and his costly progressive agenda, which calls for increased spending on social services: A plurality of 43% of Chicago adults say they'd be willing to pay more in taxes to support crime-reducing efforts.

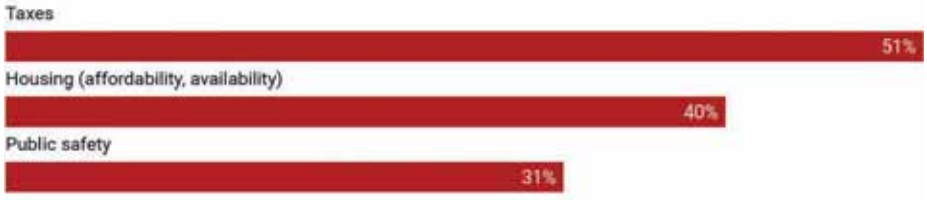
There's one hitch, however. Much of the public wants that money to be spent on getting tougher on lawbreakers. To boost public safety, 41% call for stricter sentencing for juvenile offenders, markedly more than the 26% who support greater spending on after-school programs or the 17% who see a need for increased outlays on counseling.

Despite the year-after-year declines in major crimes, the city too often is still a scary place. One recent reminder: the shootings that killed one person and wounded eight others following the lighting of the city's Christmas tree in Millennium Park. Another: the horrific attack on a woman who was set on fire on a CTA train by a man who federal prosecutors say had been arrested 72 times over the past 30 years.

But, according to our poll results, Chicago is not the "hellhole" or the "most dangerous city in the world" that President Donald Trump and others say it is. When it comes to crime, two-thirds of residents say the city gets a bad rap. Instead, Chicago is a lot like other places, only bigger. It's got deep problems that defy easy fixes. But its people largely see a city oh so slowly on the mend.

Key Chicago issues

What are the key problems/issues in your Chicago neighborhood? Top three responses:



Sources: Outward Intelligence

When social change meets less aggressive policing

By Steve Hendershot

Although sociologist Robert Sampson teaches at Harvard University, his work is rooted in multiple longitudinal studies of criminality in Chicago, including the one that informs his forthcoming book, "Marked By Time: How Social Change Has Transformed Crime and the Life Trajectories of Young Americans." That topic and local expertise give Sampson a unique lens through which to view the current decline in violent crime in Chicago and around the country. Crain's asked him to explain how generational change contributes to the phenomenon.

Crain's: You've suggested that people now in their late teens and 20s have had a very different experience with the justice system than the generation before them. Why is that, and what are the impacts?

Robert Sampson: Kids born in the early '80s came up through the crack cocaine era and then the peak of violence in the early '90s. Then kids born in the mid- to late '90s had much better trajectories, even when we match on the same sorts of characteristics. It means we can really look at how social change affects their lives.

What happened?

One factor is social and cultural change, and the other is more institutional and has to do with the criminal justice system.

The drug war was collapsing as we went further into the 2000s, so kids who were coming of age then experienced remarkably fewer arrests for drugs — even though drug use, both nationally and in Chicago, was relatively constant.

They also saw large reductions in aggressive-style policing for minor offenses like public disorder. In other words, there was a fall in counterproductive policing, because we know that police stops that are perceived to be unjust or too aggressive lead to legal cynicism — and in the long run to a mistrust of the criminal justice system, which leads to fewer reports of crimes to the police and the unraveling of societal norms. It was almost a miracle that things declined the way they did. The consequences were dramatically different by cohort.

One of the interesting findings in our study was that the high-self-control kids of the 1980s cohort had the same arrest rates as the low-self-control kids of the '90s cohort. If you think about it, the younger cohorts were just lucky. They were born under a good sign.

So law enforcement changed. What about culture or behavior?

The other factor was behavioral change. Violence and property crimes were dropping, and not just the response to them. Some of the credit goes to programs like (community violence intervention, or CVI), which have been shown to have causal effects. But these declines are pretty broad and they exist nationally, so logically that tells us that we can't just pin it on one program.

I think it's due to a couple of things. One is community-based organizations, but broader than CVI. Communities that have a higher density of nonprofits and had more funding funneled into nonprofits, especially for youth support, had lower crime rates and they have higher measured collective efficacy — social cohesion and trust among residents.

Robert Sampson

Another is improving the built environment. There's been really terrific research looking at things like greening vacant lots and cleaning up abandoned factories and how that reduces crime. And then there's technology. Although it's uncomfortable, there's just more surveillance and oversight and regulation of public spaces. It's another form of eyes on the street. That can have negative connotations, too, in terms of surveillance, and I'm not making a normative judgment. But I do think it is in part related.

After a major, sustained decline both in the number of arrests in Chicago and in the Illinois prison population, those numbers have been fairly flat over the last couple of years. Does that suggest we're finding the appropriate level?

No one has a really good answer. I think we (previously) over-policed and we over-incarcerated, and we're now in an era of radically declining incarceration — although it's slowing, as you say. So we're kind of getting the best of both worlds. We're in an equilibrium — and I hope it's not disturbed — of reform and improved criminal justice procedures. It's improving safety with a reduced footprint of the criminal justice system in kids' lives.

COMMENTARY

Employment alone won't do it. It takes healing.

Chicago's business leaders often ask a question at the center of our public safety challenges: "Is it just giving people opportunity — like a job — that changes lives?" If only it were that simple. Opportunity matters, but transformation happens when it's paired with preparation, healing, and consistent support. We see it every time a young man who once cycled through trauma learns to manage conflict, walks into a workplace with confidence, and begins a career that allows him to care for his family. That is what real public safety looks like: the right intervention at the right moment.

Teny Gross *is CEO of the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago.*

Business leaders understand pipelines. You don't build a strong workforce by offering someone a job and hoping it works out. You invest in people, surround them with support, and create environments where they can grow. Public safety works the same way. For those at the highest risk of gun violence, a job alone is not enough. What truly changes trajectories is the human connection and structure that community violence intervention (CVI) provides.

Humanizing people

Many individuals we serve have endured chronic trauma, family instability and long periods of being dismissed or feared. Before they can succeed in a workplace, they need something many have never received: consistent, trustworthy relationships. CVI practitioners relentlessly engage participants in the community. These relationships help people believe they deserve something better and that someone will walk with them as they work for it.

Building a culture of wellness and nonviolence

Public safety is not just the absence of violence. It is the presence of healing. At the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago, participants learn practical skills such as conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and communication grounded in respect. These tools support long-term stability. When someone practices nonviolence daily, they become better neighbors, colleagues, and contributors to Chicago's economy.

Coordinated support

Those most at risk face layered challenges: trauma, legal issues, unstable housing, educational gaps, financial pressures, and neighborhood tensions. No single program can solve all of that. But coordinated supports can. Our teams provide case management, clinical care, mentorship, education pathways, mediation, family engagement, and — critically — connections to quality employment. Our support structure stays with the participants throughout. That's what makes progress sustainable.

Community violence intervention leaders engage in a collaging activity designed to support mindfulness and self-expression during a site visit to Firehouse Community Art Center of Chicago. | TARIK DENNIE

Why hiring CVI participants helps business

Employers are not being asked to take on someone's entire history. By hiring CVI participants, they join a citywide coalition of business, civic, philanthropic, and neighborhood leaders committed to a safer Chicago. They also gain access to a motivated, resilient talent pool — individuals who bring creativity, problem-solving skills, and grit shaped by overcoming adversity. Hiring CVI participants also strengthens a company's understanding of many of its customers and communities, creating connection and competitive advantage. Inclusive hiring is both civic responsibility and smart business.

Quality jobs create stability

People in our programs have worked before. Their challenge isn't lack of ambition, it's lack of access to stable, dignified, well-paid careers. Employment becomes transformative when it fits a person's skills and goals and when employers commit to second-chance hiring and supportive workplaces.

Thanks to the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, the business community plays a crucial role. Public safety improves when employers partner with CVI organizations, build inclusive pipelines, and believe that talent exists in every neighborhood, including those most impacted by gun violence.

So, is it just a job that changes a life?

Never. It's the healing, relationships, skills, and coordinated supports — and then the job that becomes a career.

That's how lives change. That's how communities thrive. And that's how Chicago moves forward and becomes a safe city.

Chicago did this, not 'Operation Midway Blitz'

Garien Gatewood *is Chicago's deputy mayor of community safety.*

The fact is, Chicago is safer than it has been in six decades, and while significant challenges remain, this is an achievement worth recognizing. As the city continues to experience historic improvements, it is decreasing violent crime faster than any other city in the country.

Last year, Mayor Brandon Johnson set a goal to reduce homicides to fewer than 500, which would have been the lowest level in a decade. This was after 2024 experienced the lowest number of homicides in five years. In response, our city has reduced homicides by nearly 30%, the most significant year-over-year decrease in modern history. In the same time frame, the Chicago Police Department has increased clearance rates across all major statistical categories, meaning families are getting closure, people who cause harm are being held accountable, and people are gaining trust in collaborative approaches to community safety.

In my role as deputy mayor of community safety, I see how the entire safety ecosystem in our city works together, both internally within government and externally through everyday Chicagoans who are fighting for a safer city. Collaboration is pivotal to sustained efforts to save lives in our city. The work is intentional: Partners in community-based organizations often serve as front-line service providers and, in many cases, a one-stop shop for community members' needs, from housing to education and case management. Another vital part of the ecosystem is our ever-expanding field of community violence interrupters that work to de-escalate and prevent repeated cycles of violence.

Among the accomplishments is the expansion of capacity and training opportunities for adults and youth of highest promise. Through the Safe Chicago initiative, residents receive lifesaving instruction in Stop the Bleed, hands-on CPR, and tourniquet application. In partnership with the University of Chicago, Rush Medical Center, the Office of Emergency Management & Communications, UJimaa Medics, and others, we have significantly increased community knowledge and preparedness to save lives.

Central to this work is the People's Plan for Community Safety (PPCS), a data-informed, community-led strategy designed to confront and remedy decades of historic disinvestment. The PPCS advances initiatives across key domains — including community environment, education, economic opportunity and upward mobility, health, housing, policing, victims and survivors, and support for adults and youth of highest promise.

In addition, we have expanded victim services, with a trauma-informed curriculum for victim advocates that includes best practices for operating at the scene as well as guidelines for administering support to victims and survivors. This was the city's first ever training program for victim advocates.

Addressing the physical conditions of long-disinvested neighborhoods remains another priority. To that end, my office has supported more than 500 Safe Space Activations across our 15 priority community areas. These activations have proven effective in reducing violence by fostering safety, belonging and community engagement.

Our collaborative efforts extend across all levels of government and community. Partnerships with the Government Alliance for Safer Communities — which includes representatives from the city, county and state, along with a network of community violence intervention organizations — have strengthened coordination and helped secure critical funding to expand community violence intervention.

Law enforcement collaboration has also played a central role. The Crime Gun Intelligence Center combines dedicated law enforcement entities at the federal and local levels, prosecutors, and technology to address gun violence. Through these partnerships, and the dedication of the Chicago Police Department's Detectives Division under the leadership of the chief of detectives, Chicago has achieved its highest homicide clearance rate in recent years — 71%.

Complementing these efforts, the Mayor's Office of Community Safety implemented the Incident Response Protocol (IRP) to provide immediate support following mass shootings, youth homicides, or other high-profile incidents. Through IRP, the city coordinates rapid wraparound services for those impacted by violence.

Despite years of relentless, evidence-based efforts by the city of Chicago and partners, the current federal administration pointed to "Operation Midway Blitz" as the driving force behind Chicago's drop in crime. However, the data does not support that claim.

Federal law enforcement agents attack demonstrators protesting outside of an immigrant processing center with a barrage of tear gas and pepper balls on Sept. 27 in Broadview. | GETTY IMAGES

Operation Midway Blitz, launched in Chicago by U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) on Sept. 9, was purported as an enforcement strategy targeting people with criminal records. Though it may have been intended to do this, documentation from the Department of Justice showed that 97% of the hundreds of people swept up in Chicago's recent immigration raids had no criminal record at the time of their arrest. This further underscores the operation's actual goal, to terrorize hardworking Chicagoans.

Crime in Chicago had already declined dramatically before any federal deployment occurred. The reductions extended beyond homicides to encompass most categories of violent crime. Furthermore, the federal presence did not enhance community safety; instead, it heightened tension and fear.

ICE's unlawful use of tear gas spilled into neighborhoods, causing chaos rather than improving conditions. Imagine going about your daily routine — walking to work, attending church, or responding to a call for service — only to be engulfed in hazardous chemicals with no warning or justification. This is what residents, police officers and community members, including myself, experienced in areas across the city.

The historic reductions in crime we're seeing today are the result of years of collective, coordinated work by organizations across county, state, and local levels that have invested in prevention, intervention, and community-based solutions. What I can say with certainty is that a 54-day surge like Operation Midway Blitz did not deliver a 60-year low in crime for our city. Chicago, along with several other cities, were well on their way to making historic improvements before federal agents were deployed on residential streets in America.

A militarized approach to reducing crime isn't the answer

Ciera Bates-Chamberlain *is a pastor and executive director of Live Free Illinois.*

Just weeks ago, my fellow clergy and I stood outside of the notorious Broadview Detention Center with a simple request: Let us inside to provide the pastoral and spiritual care to our detained community members. We were denied. My heart broke looking at the boarded-up windows of the detention center — not only were the people inside being denied spiritual care, but they were also literally being robbed of sunlight.

After over a decade on Chicago's front lines — as a pastor, violence prevention practitioner, and executive director of Live Free Illinois — I've learned that real public safety takes root when we invest in communities. The brutality we're seeing from ICE and other federal forces only serves to destabilize and terrorize Chicagoans. If this administration cared about addressing gun violence, it would not have cut vital resources like health care, housing, and funding for violence-reduction initiatives. These cuts exacerbate the root causes of violence, cultivating an environment where gun violence can thrive.

The reality of gun violence

Despite the reported decrease in gun violence, hundreds of lives are still lost each year, and that includes the tragic deaths of children. But why does gun violence persist? It's not due to a lack of investment in law enforcement. Chicago Police Department spending continues to swell. Violence persists when people lack access to the resources needed to live a healthy life. We see higher rates of violence, for instance, in neighborhoods with lower high school graduation rates, high poverty, and low housing values. So, when we see cuts to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, skyrocketing health care costs, and slashed funding for public schools, we can expect gun violence to worsen.

How to meaningfully invest in Chicago's safety

Organizations like mine are trying to flip the script and show what effective investments in public safety look like.

First, we have established a Community Healing Resource Center network to address trauma within the neighborhoods most affected by violence. We do this by providing community outreach and education, trauma-informed case management, clinical counseling, and culturally competent healing practices. Many of our sites employ community members who have known the pain of gun violence and can help others navigate grief and loss. Our CHRCs explicitly target high-risk communities, such as people impacted by the carceral system, and seek to get them the resources they need to live healthy lives.

We also are advocating for the establishment of a dedicated Office of Gun Violence Reduction in Chicago. This office would aid the city in providing a comprehensive, community-centered approach to tackling gun violence, much like our CHRCs, while also working to improve clearance rates, or the number of cases solved. Unsolved homicides and nonfatal shootings perpetuate a cycle of retributive violence. Rebuilding trust in the system will heal families and lower violence.

The administration's militarized approach is doomed to fail. Instead, we must demand a dual approach: ensuring communities have the resources they need and delivering justice for those impacted by gun violence. Only then can we hope to create safer streets for all Chicagoans.

Progress is Chicago's mandate to continue working

Louisa Aviles *and* **Quintin Williams** *are senior program officers in the Gun Violence Prevention & Justice Reform Program at The Joyce Foundation.*

For years, Chicago has struggled under the weight and stigma of gun violence, becoming a perennial political talking point: the city where violence was "out of control."

But this year, something remarkable is happening. Violent crime is down by 23%; homicides by 28%. Chicago is on track to see its lowest homicide rate in 60 years. Not by "magic" but because people across this city have made a collective decision to do transformative work together.

The business sector has invested in neighborhoods in ways that signal commitment to long-term health and safety. The Chicago Police Department has committed to partnerships and tools — including a new Crime Gun Intelligence Center — focused on preventing gun violence. CPD is also strengthening community relationships that were historically fractured. Philanthropy has made sustained investments toward specific community safety goals. And community-based organizations are doing the everyday work of mediating crises, providing crucial supports to the people most vulnerable to violence, and standing in the gaps where the rest of the system often fails.

This work did not begin overnight. An important turning point came a decade ago, when philanthropy made coordinated, intentional investments in community safety, putting real resources into both police reform and community violence intervention (CVI). Before then, community-based organizations doing violence intervention work operated on shoestring budgets, short-term grants, and constant uncertainty about whether their doors could stay open. In 2015, funders committed to building something more durable, making grants that allowed CVI organizations to stabilize and grow in ways Chicago had never seen.

Today, with significant public funding from the state and federal American Rescue Plan Act funds, Chicago has a robust CVI ecosystem with trained professionals, data-driven strategies, and real staying power. As CVI matured, shootings and homicides began to decline.

Another factor that deserves more attention is the renewed focus on solving murders, particularly in communities suffering from disproportionate gun violence.

When families in Chicago's Black and Brown communities lose loved ones to homicide, they too often bear the additional pain of no answers, accountability, or sense that the system is working to bring justice. Low homicide clearance rates undermine trust, fuel cycles of retaliation, and create the perception that Black and Brown lives matter less than others. Increased attention to solving homicides has sent an important message: Every victim deserves justice.

Chicago is demonstrating that violence is not immovable. It responds to strategy, resources and collaboration. But if we take progress for granted, we risk losing it.

The path forward is clear:

First, we must continue working across ideological differences and sectors. The partnerships that help reduce violence rely on trust, coordination and recognition — even when the going gets tough.

Second, we must continue scaling CVI investments to levels that match the challenge. CVI works when it is well-managed and laser-focused on the people most vulnerable to being involved in violence. Stability through steady public and private funding allows programs to plan for years instead of months and ensures a healthy and well-supported CVI workforce.

BLOOMBERG

Finally, we must ensure that law enforcement continues to use all the tools at its disposal to focus on solving homicides and shootings in all of Chicago's communities. Illinois' new Homicide Data Transparency Act, enacted earlier this year, requires law enforcement statewide to submit detailed quarterly data on homicides and shootings, including case counts, cases cleared by arrest, and cases closed for other reasons (for example because a suspect died or prosecutors declined to charge), as well as cases referred for prosecution. The Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority will then publish that information publicly starting in July 2026.

Just because violence is down by more than 20% in Chicago doesn't mean residents feel that much safer. It will take time and ongoing commitment to build on these gains against the backdrop of declining federal support for gun violence prevention efforts. Our progress should not be treated as a trophy. It should be treated as a mandate.

'When resources go up, community violence goes down'

Lori Crowder *is executive director of Alliance of Local Service Organizations in Humboldt Park, and* **Yolanda Fields** *is executive director of Breakthrough Urban Ministries in East Garfield Park.*

For the first time in two decades, Chicago will experience four years in a row of declining gun violence, coinciding with the largest drop in gun violence since 1965. This is no fluke; it is the direct result of citizens and stakeholders alike saying enough is enough, advocating for funding to be directed to nonprofits and government agencies tasked with reaching those most affected by gun violence.

A contributing factor to recent declines is community violence intervention (CVI), an evidence- and trauma-informed approach that offers a range of services that proactively engage individuals with the highest likelihood of being involved in gun violence. Communities Partnering 4 Peace (CP4P) is a group of local CVI organizations that utilizes a professionalized workforce to interrupt conflicts, build deep relationships, and connect families to the wraparound services that confront the roots of disinvestment.

For us, these statistics are not only encouraging to see, but they also represent lives saved and opportunities for individuals to utilize the resources we make available to them to pursue dignified lives.

For decades, neighborhoods like East Garfield Park and Humboldt Park have been plagued by unstable housing, food insecurity, limited access to health care, underfunded schools, and too few safe spaces for joyful recreation. These conditions foster an environment where violence can become the norm.

Breakthrough Urban Ministries, a CP4P organization serving East Garfield Park, in close partnership with neighbors and community stakeholders, has responded with a comprehensive approach. We invest in families and our youth — beginning with preschool, after-school, arts, and sports programs — and offer stable housing options, access to healthy food, and wellness services that address trauma and support the whole person. When people find stability and can see real opportunities ahead, the entire community thrives.

In East Garfield Park, gun violence is trending down. As of December, homicides, shootings, and robberies have all dropped by more than 30% year to date. The decrease in gun violence shows that comprehensive, community-led strategies work. East Garfield Park is proving that when we invest in people, communities heal.

For almost 30 years, another CP4P organization, the Alliance of Local Service Organizations (ALSO), has implemented comprehensive solutions to address community violence and domestic violence on Chicago's Northwest Side, including Humboldt Park. We have experienced fluctuations in funding and violence, so we are clear about the link between resources and safety. When resources go up, community violence goes down. Resources include consistent and adequate funding, trained credible staff, living-wage jobs, affordable housing, high-quality education, and a stable network of partners across the city working together toward a common goal of a safer Chicago.

This year, Humboldt Park has experienced the lowest number of shootings year to date through November since at least 2010, based on publicly available data. And over the last two years, Humboldt Park has seen the lowest two-year total of homicides in 20 years.

Community violence intervention leaders at a community giveaway event in Chicago in January as part of the University of Chicago's CVI Leadership Academy. | TARIK DENNIE

However, this progress is not the result of a single program. It is the outcome of a comprehensive public safety ecosystem that includes CVI. Over the last eight years, ALSO and Breakthrough, along with our CP4P partners, have shepherded resources to implement proven strategies to quell community violence.

To be clear, gun violence in Chicago is down overall, but not evenly across all communities, and rates of domestic violence continue to climb. To help curb violence across our entire city and to help all people not just survive but thrive, we need continued public and private support to continue our pursuit of Chicago becoming the safest big city in America.