

HEADWAY

# A City Tries to Measure the Violence It's Preventing

In Baton Rouge, a public safety experiment could help to answer a critical question: Do community efforts to reduce street violence work?

**By Mark Obbie**

**Photographs by Dean Majd**

Reporting from Baton Rouge, La.

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**Headway** is an initiative from The New York Times exploring the world's challenges through the lens of progress.

When Liz and Louis Robinson's eldest son, Louis Jr., began to court trouble on the streets of Baton Rouge, La., Ms. Robinson worried that one of the bullets flying through their neighborhood — and occasionally through their windows and walls — would eventually find him. So she gave him an ultimatum.

“I told him, ‘A military man is going to come,’” she remembered. “‘Either you go with him or you get out of my house.’” This was 2008, and Americans were stationed in war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. But she figured those places were safer than Baton Rouge.

Louis Jr. took Option A, joining the Army the year after he graduated from high school.

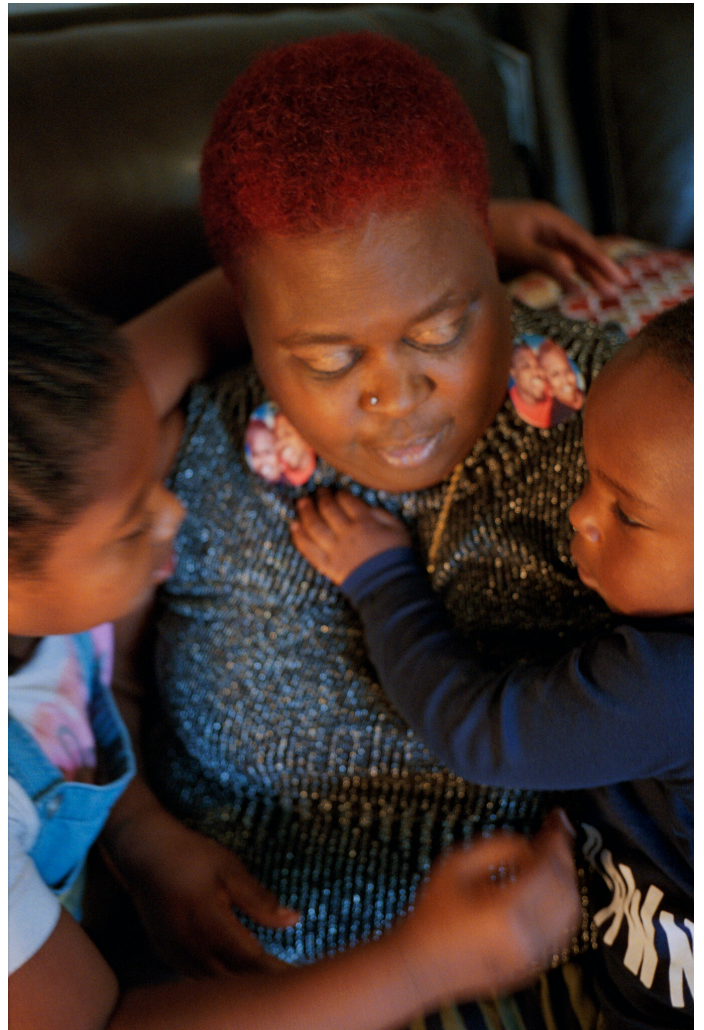
After six years in the service, including one year in Iraq, Louis came home. He took a Coca-Cola warehouse job, became a father to three children and was performing as a rapper under the name Louis BadAzz.

Just shy of his 30th birthday, Louis Jr. was leaving a friend’s house when he was shot dead. He was one of 78 people killed in Baton Rouge in 2018.

Ms. Robinson grieved. She was also angry — at the people shooting up her neighborhood, at potential witnesses who wouldn’t help the police solve the crime, at the police for not finding her son’s killer.



Louis Robinson Jr., who performed under the name Louis BadAzz, is memorialized in his parents' home.



Ms. Robinson with two of her grandchildren.





An empty lot on Cadillac Street near where Louis Jr. became one of 78 people killed in Baton Rouge in 2018.

Six months before Louis Jr. was killed, Murphy Paul became the chief of police in Baton Rouge. Mr. Paul had come from the upper ranks of the Louisiana State Police, and Sharon Weston Broome, the mayor who hired him, gave him a mandate: make change. Among his early acts was dismissing a white police officer who shot and killed a Black man named Alton Sterling in 2016. The officer's actions and Sterling's death, caught on phone cameras, ignited existing tensions between police and Black residents in the city. Chief Paul, who is Black, began an overhaul of the Police Department's policies on discipline and the use of force.





Chief Murphy Paul was given a mandate to make change in the Baton Rouge Police Department.

But reforming a mostly white police department in a Black-majority city was only part of the job; just as urgent was confronting the street gun violence — what social scientists sometimes call community gun violence — that led to Louis Jr.'s death.

While mass shootings strike at seemingly random locations — concerts, parades, schools — community gun violence strikes dependably in the most disadvantaged city blocks. Apart from suicide, it is by far the deadliest use of guns in the United States and hits hardest in places where poverty and lack of opportunity give rise to crime. Homicide was the leading cause of death among Black people between 15 and 24 in 2021, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In Baton Rouge, where just over half of the 221,000 residents are Black, 85 percent of homicide

victims in 2022 — and 80 percent of homicide suspects — were Black, according to a study by the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform.

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The concentration of this violence helps fuel it. Victims, shooters and their families are often entangled in networks that can be impervious to and suspicious of law enforcement. Chief Paul wanted to break through those barriers.

He embraced the prevailing progressive theory of police reform: police should be guardians of a community, not warriors against it. If the police are trusted, the theory goes, witnesses feel comfortable coming forward and crimes are solved, disrupting cycles of violence and retaliation among a tiny number of heavily armed young men.

To that end, in early 2019, Chief Paul met with Ms. Robinson and other people who had lost family members to violence. “I wasn’t prepared for the passion, outrage, the anger and the pain that I was going to experience,” the chief said. Ms. Robinson, in particular, gave him an earful.

He persisted. Better policing, he told the family members, was essential, but insufficient. “Look,” he told them, “we need help.”





After Liz Robinson lost her son to gun violence, she decided to run a non-profit called C.H.A.N.G.E. to help other families affected by gun violence Karan Deep Singh and Kathleen Flynn for The New York Times

The chief promised to work with members of the community, directing more resources and police help to groups already trying to prevent violence. Moreover, in a new experiment, he would work within a broader public safety program run by the mayor's office and community groups, spreading responsibility for public safety beyond the police.

All this, he hoped, would help to prevent further violence. But determining which prevention strategies really work is an evolving and complicated science. Law enforcement strategies are studied more often than community-driven alternatives, which means most existing research backs up police-driven approaches. Federal anti-violence funding has long skewed heavily toward policing, and police departments have the training and systems to collect the raw data that researchers use to study violence trends. When it



comes to community-violence intervention methods like the one being tried in Baton Rouge, there are some promising results, but the number of studies is limited and the overall evidence remains unsettled.

In recent years, however, hundreds of millions of dollars from private foundations and the Biden administration have gone into these alternatives, offering a genuine opportunity to study their effectiveness.

“It’s exciting, and it’s a moment of some trepidation as well, because there’s a lot on the line,” said Nina Revoyr of Ballmer Group, the lead private funder of the organization advising Baton Rouge’s experimental program. To people on the ground, helping a teenager get a summer job or calming a street dispute before it boils over is a self-evident success. But funders and policymakers want quantifiable, statistical evidence that these programs reduce violence overall. Future support nationwide hinges on the rigorous collection and analysis of that data.

Baton Rouge is taking on the data collection challenge. And that means the people trying to prevent violence must learn a strange new language. Complex, sometimes messy situations — offhand conversations with teenagers in schools, bedside visits to hospital emergency rooms, late-night responses to chaotic crime scenes — have to be translated into atomized units that can flow into spreadsheets and databases and regression analyses. The process of codifying human interactions into orderly, ruthless statistics falls to teams of people whose preparation for this work often began with surviving violent traumas of their own.

A year after Louis Jr.’s death, Chief Paul approached Ms. Robinson once again with a specific request: He wanted her to join a victims support group.

This time, she agreed.

# Learning the Newark Method



The victims support group was run by Sateria Tate-Alexander, another woman Chief Paul had recruited. Like Ms. Robinson, Ms. Tate-Alexander, 48, raised her family in Baton Rouge. Her son had also been struck by a bullet, at age 17, though he survived. But it was the police killing of Alton Sterling that “that kind of really lit my fire,” she said. She organized demonstrations, pitched in to lobby legislators for police reform, and convened neighborhood meetings.

As the Baton Rouge project was taking off, Ms. Tate-Alexander visited Newark, N.J., for inspiration. There, she saw the city’s street team in action and decided that “this is exactly what we need.”



Newark had become a national beacon of violence reduction, in part through the work of Aqeela Sherrills, whom an admirer calls “one of the godfathers of community-based violence intervention.” In 1992, at age 22, Mr. Sherrills, a former gang member, helped broker a truce between the Bloods and the Crips in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. For the next dozen years, he crisscrossed the country and the globe, teaching about how he did it. That is what he was doing in 2004 when his 18-year-old son, Terrell, home on a break from college, was shot dead at a party.

“It made me question everything,” Mr. Sherrills told me. “I was broken.”

His son’s murder went unsolved. Friends urged retaliation against the man believed to have fired the gun. Neither the justice system nor street justice offered any balm for his trauma, and he began to understand this failure as the root of the problem. The system was sorting people into victims (who were offered counseling and compensation) and perpetrators (whom it either punished harshly or failed to hold accountable). To Mr. Sherrills, this binary view encouraged a never-ending cycle of retaliatory violence.



Aqeela Sherrills, an anti-violence activist, brought the methods he had used in Newark to Baton Rouge and other cities.

Mr. Sherrills argued that breaking that divide and providing mental health care and other support could deter young men from taking matters into their own hands. He took those ideas to Newark in 2014 and would later help to create a street team that focused as much on would-be shooters as on shooting victims and their families. The idea is to deploy former gang members or others with criminal records to mediate disputes and prevent retaliation. The street team offered people counseling and connections to jobs, housing and health care. Government agencies and community-based organizations partnered to create what Mr. Sherrills called a public safety ecosystem.

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In 2020, when cities nationwide saw spikes in gun violence, Newark held the line while all but eliminating police shootings. Mr. Sherrills said he was besieged with calls from cities wanting to learn Newark's special sauce. Later, he made connections in the Biden White House and helped organize a Black-led push for the national programs that are now funding efforts like the one in Baton Rouge. By 2023, his strategies were credited with helping to cut homicides in Newark in half since 2016.

Baton Rouge became the first city outside New Jersey to be tutored in the Newark method. The mayor's office started an effort to mimic Newark's public safety ecosystem, overseen by Courtney Scott, then a mayoral aide. Four national organizations, including one founded by Mr. Sherrills, advise the city on community intervention, crime data analysis and other matters. At the heart of this national and local apparatus is the street team, led by Ms. Tate-Alexander.

## Calming the urge to retaliate





By June 2021, when Ms. Tate-Alexander started assembling the street team, Ms. Robinson joined up. She had already taken a leading role at the victims support group and, eager to make an impact, she doubled up on her work.

The two women clicked from the start. Ms. Tate-Alexander has a college degree and a background in information technology and project management. Ms. Robinson, 55, who ran an office-cleaning

crew with her husband for many years, has dyed bright-red hair and lets fly the occasional F-bomb. “Liz came in and we could just see it in her,” Ms. Tate-Alexander said. “The fight was just there.”

Chief Paul ordered police dispatchers to send alerts to the team for shootings in the high-crime neighborhoods that the team covers. The team’s high-risk interventionists are the first responders to shooting scenes and heated disputes, but Ms. Robinson got an exemption from shooting-scene duties. “I just can’t see a Black man laid out there like that,” she said. “No.”

Four men do the bulk of the street team’s outreach. They all grew up in Baton Rouge, and as in other cities with intervention programs, some sold drugs or committed even more serious crimes.

One of the group’s elders is Gerald Haynes, 51, whom everyone calls Face for the jagged scar that runs from his left ear to his throat. Mr. Haynes spent 27 years in prison for his role in a drive-by shooting, an attempt at retribution for the killing of a friend.

Mr. Haynes knew a thing or two about the urge to retaliate: It had cost him nearly three decades of freedom. He also thought he knew how to talk to young hotheads. In prison, he said, “I had to learn how to deal with them in a confined area where I could not get away from them and they couldn’t get away from me.” But during his training in Newark, he discovered more refined skills of listening, reflecting back what people say to make them feel heard, and coming up with plans for people to step away from an argument without losing face.





Gerald Haynes joined the Baton Rouge anti-violence street team after spending 27 years in prison.

Khoury Brown, 32, another high-risk interventionist, is best known to many of the young people the street team works with as the rapper Geaux Yella, with 129,000 Instagram followers. His skill with words is central to his job, but sometimes when a fight is brewing, he fears words will fail him. “I could have both parties in a full-blooded conversation where everything’s about to die down, and I got one knucklehead who feels like what I’m doing is soft,” he said. But he’s a powerful influence even when he’s not on the scene.





The high-risk interventionists will “get up out of their beds at 2 o’clock in the morning to do whatever it is that’s necessary,” says Ms. Tate-Alexander, who runs the street team.



A high-risk interventionist, Khoury Brown is known around Baton Rouge as the rapper Geaux Yella.





Darius Crockett with his son.

One of the street team's initiatives is a mentorship program, in which young people at risk of violence are paired with mentors like Darius Crockett. Mr. Crockett had drifted to the streets as a teenager in Baton Rouge, selling drugs. But he had since gotten his G.E.D. and found work as a welder. He was assigned to work with a 15-year-old named Markel.

Shootings happen frequently on Markel's street. His mother, Kayla Atkins, uses a wheelchair, having been paralyzed by a gunshot long ago. From a young age, Markel had to be a caregiver. As he entered his teens, he was getting into fights. When he was 14, one of his best friends was shot and killed. His mother said she desperately wanted to save her son "from going down that path."



The mentorship program required Markel to complete three goals. Knowing Markel wanted to rap, Mr. Crockett urged him to enter a talent contest, where he performed an original rap song. Markel took first place, which meant he not only accomplished his first goal, but won prizes that would satisfy his other two: He would be a featured performer in a video with Geaux Yella himself and participate in a recording session. Markel eagerly looked forward to the coming winter when the session would happen. Mr. Crockett also helped the boy land a job at a city-run summer camp.



Mr. Crockett, left, acted as a mentor to Markel, helping him focus on music and a summer job.

Then, in June, Markel got into an argument with his sister. He had a “meltdown,” slamming doors and throwing things, Ms. Atkins said. Feeling helpless to control him, she called the police — and



Mr. Crockett. The police officer put Markel in handcuffs in the back of his cruiser.

When Mr. Crockett showed up, he asked to speak privately with Markel. The officer let him into the car. Mr. Crockett empathized with Markel. He told the teenager that he himself had “lost my anger a little bit” with his girlfriend a few days earlier and had to reel himself in. “Everybody gets angry,” Mr. Crockett told Markel. “But right now, at this moment, you got to control it.”

He leveraged Markel’s aspirations, promising that he could still appear in the Geaux Yella video. “I’m still your big brother,” he assured him. “I’ll always be out here.” Markel settled down, and the police officer, with Ms. Atkins’s blessing, let Mr. Crockett take the boy to another relative’s house.

## A “faith-based movement”?



Poverty has always bred violence. In the 1990s, an upsurge in violent crime led cities to try new methods to address it on the streets. The first experiments leaned heavily on law enforcement. Hot-spots policing, for instance, the practice of focusing police attention on particular troubled neighborhoods, spread around the country.

Then, in 1999, a Chicago epidemiologist named Gary Slutkin picked up an old idea of using outreach workers to mediate street disputes. Framing the problem in public health terms, he argued that retaliatory violence was like a communicable disease and that outreach workers — he called them violence interrupters — could mimic an immune response. Groups more or less modeled after Dr. Slutkin's organization, which came to be called Cure Violence, popped up in other cities.

Other efforts springing from communities found a foothold in the violence prevention universe: youth counseling programs, visits with shooting victims while they are still in the hospital, cleanup of empty buildings and vacant lots that attract crime.

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These ideas had an instinctive appeal. Violence was not about bad people, but about behaviors that could be changed. And violence interruption, in particular, gave agency both to members of a stricken community and people who regretted their own violent history. Overall, these methods emphasized prevention rather than punishment.

As these programs proliferated, however, policymakers had one overriding question: Do they work?

Strong evidence emerged for some law enforcement efforts. Hot-spots policing has been studied many times in different cities and has consistently been shown to reduce violence. A carrot-and-stick approach called focused deterrence, which offers counseling and job training alongside the threat of prosecution for future crimes, has also gotten a research thumbs-up. Federal grants to initiate these policing programs often came with money for outside researchers to study them.







Historically, more research money has gone toward violence prevention programs run by the police than toward those run by community groups.

But money wasn't flowing to studies of community-based programs like violence interruption. Those studies require taxing, time-consuming design, said Jeffrey A. Butts, a violence researcher and the director of the Research and Evaluation Center at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. He lays some fault on researchers who prefer the easier work of analyzing police data.

Much of the research that has been done on community prevention programs is not sufficiently rigorous, Dr. Butts argues. He has studied community interventions for decades and supports systemic responses to violence, but criticizes organizations that champion their success without sufficient data. "I see it becoming a faith-based movement," Dr. Butts said. "There has to be really transparent professional research in order to stand up in public and say this works." When it comes to community-based interventions, he added, "we are nowhere close to having that."

What troubles him most is that governments and foundations will walk away from programs that lack consistent and replicable evidence. This, he fears, will lead cities to rely only on strategies that have strong evidence — like policing.

To bulk up on evidence, Baton Rouge hired a data analysis company to create a system to capture the raw data. That system is still in its infancy, Ms. Scott said, and needs at least two more years before the city should even consider commissioning a formal quantitative evaluation. "We're still working like a science project in a testing and observation mode," she said.

The burden of logging that raw data falls to the street team. It's not a job they particularly relish. "They'll get up out of their beds at 2 o'clock in the morning to go do whatever it is that's necessary," Ms.

Tate-Alexander said. “The work is fulfilling to them. But the writing part? Yeah, no, that’s not their favorite thing.”

About once a week, Ms. Tate-Alexander calls a data day where they all come to the “war room,” a windowless hovel tucked away in a community center, to get their logging done.



Ms. Robinson, Ms. Tate-Alexander and Mr. Sherrills in the street team’s “war room.”

They categorize each interaction on the streets: a mediation (getting conflicting parties to talk before violence occurs), an intervention (an attempt to head off retaliation after a violent incident) or a prevention (an intervention that demonstrably headed off more violence). They record whom they talked to, what was said and what they believe should be done next. “We absolutely track everything,” Ms. Tate-Alexander said.



Those reports are confidential, to protect sources' safety and to preserve the team's independence from law enforcement and build trust with the community. But every month, categories and actions are counted, anonymously, and then fed into the system that tracks the entire Baton Rouge public safety program, which includes 20 other agencies and organizations.

The dull mechanics of bureaucratic accountability are needed to comply with the multiple federal and private grants that pay for this work. Each grant has its own requirements.

One afternoon, interventionists reviewed work assignments at one end of a war room conference table while Ms. Tate-Alexander reviewed spreadsheet format changes the city wanted as it tracked the spending of one federal grant.

Mr. Sherrills was in town for one of his periodic visits. Six feet tall, with an ever-present Stacy Adams fedora, he cuts a striking figure. He is something of a celebrity in town, hugging and hand-slapping his way through talks and meetings.

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The demands of funders and the research community sometimes frustrate him. He fears that the emphasis in social science toward quantitative research strips out the texture of real lives. Statistics can't capture what Markel felt when he won the talent competition or how a visit from Liz Robinson comforted a grieving family.

Mr. Sherrills is a believer in research. He was instrumental in getting a team from the University of California, Los Angeles to conduct a narrative evaluation of the Newark street team. But even Newark's precipitous fall in crime did not have the statistical

backing necessary to prove that community-led interventions were responsible. When I brought up Dr. Butts's critiques to Mr. Sherrills, he grew heated, even tearing up at one point. "Why we got to keep proving ourselves?"

The effort in Baton Rouge presents an opportunity not only to save lives, but to establish the community's role in doing so. While members of the street team groaned and eye-rolled through a conference call with a city official, Mr. Sherrills counseled patience. "This," he told them, "is the biggest challenge of this work."

"I can't touch everybody"



In 2023, homicides and nonfatal shootings fell as quickly across the country as they had risen during the Covid years. Analysts posit that some combination of pandemic shutdowns and protests after the murder of George Floyd threw normal social supports and policing into chaos, and that the trend is starting to reverse as life gets back to normal. But the data puzzle applies here, too: Nobody can say for sure.

In Baton Rouge, homicides and nonfatal shootings dropped by one-third between 2021 and 2023, to 359 victims from 535. That was a sharper decline than in many other cities.

Yet the picture still isn't clear. Violence in Baton Rouge remains higher than it was in the years before the pandemic and is still extraordinarily high for a city its size. And there were 31 homicides in the first quarter of 2024, double the number in the same period



in 2023. The answer to whether community-based efforts help Baton Rouge make significant strides will only come with rigorous research down the line.

In July, Chief Paul announced he would retire after nearly six years on the job. Under his watch, officers' use of force went down, more Black officers were hired, and department policies and crime statistics became more accessible.

But throughout his tenure, there were pockets of opposition to his approach to violence prevention, including from members of the Metropolitan Council. Weeks after Mr. Paul announced his retirement, two lawsuits were filed claiming that officers secretly interrogated and brutalized suspects at a police warehouse. The mayor shut down the warehouse and the unit that was accused of using it. (The lawsuits are ongoing.) When questioned at a Metropolitan Council meeting about the lawsuits and alleged misconduct, Chief Paul lashed out at two council members who represent white-majority districts, essentially accusing them of racist motivations in trying to undermine him and his efforts to rid the department of "bad cops." (They denied his accusations and then unsuccessfully pressed the mayor to fire Mr. Paul ahead of his planned departure.) Community members held a "Stand With Chief Murphy Paul Rally" outside police headquarters. In the front row at that rally was Ms. Robinson.



The homicides increased in Baton Rouge during the pandemic, and fell afterwards. But the number of deaths is still high — 359 people in 2023.

Chief Paul's replacement is Thomas S. Morse Jr., a 20-year veteran of the department. Mr. Morse, who is white, came into office voicing support for the community's role in violence prevention. At first, Ms. Robinson and Ms. Tate-Alexander seemed wary when I asked about him. They didn't know him, they said, but hoped he would follow Chief Paul's example.

As 2023 came to a close, the street team faced new troubles. In early December, Mr. Crockett, the street team member who had mentored Markel, was charged with aggravated battery, domestic abuse and child endangerment. His girlfriend told the police that he had slammed her head against a wall and thrown a steam iron

at her while children were sleeping in the next room. When I called Mr. Crockett to ask about the police report, he confirmed that he and his girlfriend had fought, but insisted he had not attacked her.

Ms. Tate-Alexander said that Mr. Crockett is dedicated to his work and she has never seen him be violent. When he told her about the charges, she put Mr. Crockett on an unpaid suspension for a week, but he is back at work until the case against him is resolved. She will be guided by what happens in court. He pleaded not guilty at his arraignment in March.

On Dec. 30, Baton Rouge recorded its last homicide of 2023. A 20-year-old man named Dy'Lan Fillmore-Mitchell had been shot multiple times in his car. Ms. Robinson heard about it when her aunt called that morning. The brutal intimacy of concentrated violence had struck again: Mr. Fillmore-Mitchell was her aunt's grandson.

Ms. Robinson rushed to her family. A video taken at a memorial a week later captured Ms. Robinson in her community-organizing element, reminding the mourners that after they moved on, the family would still grieve. "I'm telling y'all because I *know*," she said, tapping her chest for emphasis.

Mr. Fillmore-Mitchell and Ms. Robinson's son Louis shared a birthday, 15 years apart. "Gun violence has touched my family again," she told me. "And I put so much hard work in it, in the work, you know, for my family to be protected."

She described the torment she had felt, her mind spinning, trying to fathom what more she could do.

"I know I can't touch everybody," she said. "I know that. I just have to work harder."



## Headway wants to hear from people affected by gun violence and those working to end it.

How important is it to pursue stronger research on the effectiveness of community violence prevention? \*

☐ Highly important

☐ Somewhat important

☐ Not important

### Why did you answer that way?

What shaped your thinking on the importance of research about community violence prevention?

0 words

### What experience do you have with gun violence?

Check all that apply.

☐ I've been shot

☐ I know someone who has been shot

☐ I have shot someone

☐ I work as a violence interrupter in my community

☐ I work in law enforcement

- ☐ I work with communities affected by gun violence in another way (e.g., advocate, politician, researcher, counselor, social worker, teacher, etc.)
- 
- ☐ Something else

**What would you like to tell us about your experience?**

Please share as much or as little as you feel comfortable with.

0 words

**What has your experience taught you about gun violence and its prevention?**

0 words

**How has your experience or fear of gun violence changed your everyday life?**

0 words

**What conversations do you think we should be having about gun violence, and who should we be talking with?**

0 words

**What are your questions about gun violence prevention?**



**What is your name? \***

**What is your email address? \***

**Where do you live? \***

Search places

**What is your gender identity?**

We are committed to making this project inclusive. This question asks for personal sensitive information that is protected by privacy laws. Answering is optional.

**Which of the following best describes your race or ethnicity? Check whichever apply.**

We are committed to making this project inclusive. This question asks for personal sensitive information that is protected by privacy laws. Answering is optional.

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

☐ Asian

☐ Black or African American

☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

☐ White

☐ Other Race

**How old are you?**

We are committed to making this project inclusive. This question asks for personal sensitive information that is protected by privacy laws. Answering is optional.

☐ 18 to 24

☐ 25 to 34

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☐ 35 to 44

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☐ 45 to 54

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☐ 55 to 64

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☐ 65 to 74

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☐ 75 or above

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**Mark Obbie**, a writer based near Rochester, N.Y., has written about gun violence prevention and policing for more than a decade. **Dean Majd** is a self-taught lens-based artist based out of Queens, N.Y., with Palestinian roots. His work focuses on trauma and how it manifests within contemporary masculinity when negative emotions are repressed.

Produced by Jason Chiu, Karan Deep Singh, Alice Fang, Eve Lyons, Vera Titunik.

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