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# The effectiveness of street outreach worker programs for reducing violence: a systematic review

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Maybe

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## Title of the review

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The effectiveness of street outreach worker programs for reducing violence: a systematic review

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## Background

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One of the options available for addressing gun, group, and gang-related violence in communities is the adoption of street outreach worker programs. Typically these programs rely on conflict mediation and/or “violence interruption” strategies to prevent violence. They often focus heavily on preventing retaliatory violence, particularly when a group or gang-related act of violence may result in an ongoing cycle of tit-for-tat violence. The best-known example of these programs is *Cure Violence*, though it is not the only initiative in which street outreach workers play a central role in attempting to prevent violence (Butts et al., 2015). The goal of the proposed systematic review is to synthesize the research evidence on the effect of street outreach worker programs – specifically those that rely on conflict mediation and/or violence interruption strategies – for reducing violence.

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## Policy relevance

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For policymakers seeking to reduce gun, group, and gang-related violence, street outreach worker programs are perhaps the most prominent non-law enforcement option that is currently available. These programs have a long history, but recently have received significant attention and support due to the popularity of *Cure Violence*, an initiative that launched originally in Chicago in 2000 and has since spread around the world (Skogan et al., 2009). The evaluation evidence on *Cure Violence* and similar street outreach initiatives is of variable quality, and the findings vary widely. Some studies have found that it reduces violence, some studies have found that it has no effect on violence, and some studies have found that it increases violence (e.g., see Delgado et al., 2018; Fox et al., 2015; Maguire et al., 2018; Picard-Fritsche & Cerniglia, 2013; Webster et al., 2012, 2013; Whitehall et al., 2014; Wilson & Chermak, 2011; Wilson et al., 2010). The variability in both the quality and results of studies leaves policy makers in a difficult position, unable to make sense of a conflicting body of research evidence. The proposed systematic review will seek to make sense of this growing body of research by synthesizing the highest-quality research evidence on whether, and under what conditions, these types of initiatives are effective in reducing violence.

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## Objectives

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- Are street outreach worker strategies that rely on conflict mediation and/or violence interruption strategies effective at reducing violence?
- Are there certain program elements that render these strategies more or less effective?

- Are there certain conditions under which these strategies are more or less effective?

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## **Existing reviews**

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To our knowledge, there are no existing systematic reviews on this topic.

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## **Intervention**

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Our specific interest is in street outreach worker programs that rely on conflict mediation or violence interruption strategies to reduce violence in a community setting. Such programs typically involve assigning outreach workers or “violence interrupters” to work in communities with high rates of violence, acquaint themselves with gang members and other offenders who may be involved in violence, and engage in a range of activities meant to prevent violence. The conflict mediation or violence interruption activities may involve, for instance, talking people out of carrying out an imminent act of violence; arranging for influential people (friends, relatives, faith leaders) to pressure a likely offender not to carry out an imminent act of violence; transporting a likely victim of violence to a safe place; or arranging a truce for people who are likely to commit acts of violence against one another. These programs are not police-led and generally involve little, if any, direct partnership between outreach workers and law enforcement. There are now several impact evaluations of such initiatives that rely on a variety of non-experimental or quasi-experimental designs. To our knowledge, there are not yet any randomized trials evaluating street outreach worker programs. The quasi-experimental evaluations that we are already aware of rely on a variety of designs, but in general they involve interrupted time series analyses or non-equivalent comparison group designs in which intervention neighbourhoods or communities are compared to non-targeted geographic areas.

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## **Population**

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The focus of the proposed review is on street outreach worker programs that have been implemented in communities with the goal of reducing violence. Street outreach worker programs that do not intervene to reduce violence would not be eligible. Violence intervention programs led by police or other criminal justice agencies would also not be eligible. Thus, there would be no overlap between this review and the focused deterrence strategies systematic review (Braga & Weisburd, 2012).

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## **Outcomes**

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The principal outcome of interest is violence at the neighborhood or community level. The measures of violence used in these studies differ depending on the specific aim of each individual initiative. The most typical measures are homicides, shootings, serious

assaults/woundings, hospital gunshot wound admissions, and calls to the police for violent incidents. In order to be eligible for inclusion, a study must contain one or more measures of the incidence or prevalence of violence.

Some studies also contain measures of secondary outcomes derived from survey data. Such measures include outcomes like fear of crime and social norms conducive to the use of violence. To the extent that such measures are available, we will treat them as secondary outcomes.

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## Study designs

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The proposed systematic review will include only those studies that contain quantitative estimates of the impact of street outreach worker programs on a measure of the incidence or prevalence of violence. The only studies that will be included are those that rely on experimental designs that randomize the intervention to target or comparison sites or quasi-experimental designs that utilize a comparison area (though, to our knowledge, there are no studies in this genre that use experimental designs).

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## Review authors

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**Lead review author:** The lead author is the person who develops and co-ordinates the review team, discusses and assigns roles for individual members of the review team, liaises with the editorial base and takes responsibility for the on-going updates of the review.

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## **Roles and responsibilities**

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Ed Maguire is a criminologist who specializes in policing, violence, research methodology, and applied statistics. He was part of a research team that conducted two meta-analyses on toxicology study findings among homicide victims.

Cody Telep is a criminologist who specializing in policing and experimental methodologies. He has worked previously on Campbell Crime and Justice systematic reviews on problem-oriented policing, displacement in large geographic areas, and community policing. These reviews also all included meta-analyses.

Thomas Abt has extensive experience in the research and policy worlds on issues related to gun, gang, and youth violence. He is also a member of the Campbell Collaboration Crime and Justice Group Steering Committee.

- Content: Ed Maguire / Thomas Abt
- Systematic review methods: Cody Telep / Thomas Abt
- Statistical analysis: Ed Maguire/ Cody Telep
- Information retrieval: Cody Telep / Research Assistant

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## **Funding**

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We have no plans to apply for funding. Ed Maguire will donate his research assistant (who works 10 hours per week) to the project for the full 2018/19 academic year. Our deadline for completing the review is 15 May 2019.

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## **Potential conflicts of interest**

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Ed Maguire conducted an evaluation of Cure Violence in Trinidad and Tobago.

Cody Telep has not been involved in the development or evaluation of street outreach worker programs.

Thomas Abt led the development of New York's GIVE (Gun-Involved Violence Elimination) Initiative as former Deputy Secretary of Public Safety. Initiatives funded under GIVE included street outreach worker programs.

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### **Preliminary timeframe**

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- Date you plan to submit a draft protocol: 15 December 2018
- Date you plan to submit a draft review: 15 May 2019