



Continuing Efforts To Slow Violent Crime

Promising Innovations From 3 Democrat-Led Cities

By Rachael Eisenberg and Allie Preston July 27, 2022

Historically, the United States' approach to crime has been reactionary and overreliant on criminal legal sanctions, and it has failed to adequately address the social, health, and behavioral factors that drive crime.¹ Still, as the country continues to grapple with a rise in gun violence, a new wave of “tough-on-crime” rhetoric has emerged, blaming progressive policies for the increase in violent crime.² While violent crime rose across the country in 2020, progressive leaders in cities are investing resources into proven public health and community-based solutions to stop gun violence before it starts,³ and these cities are seeing early signs of success in stemming the tide.

Rather than accept calls for tough-on-crime policies, leaders in Houston, Boston, and Newark, New Jersey, have taken a more holistic approach to prevent violence before it starts. These cities are three examples of jurisdictions that have implemented comprehensive public safety plans focused not only on stopping violent crime but also on prioritizing community-driven and public health-focused innovations that break the cycle of violence.

Houston: Incorporating public health initiatives

Like most of the United States,⁴ Houston grappled with increases in homicides during the first two years of the pandemic. In February 2022, Mayor Sylvester Turner (D) called violent crime in Houston a “public health crisis.”⁵ The rate of homicides in Houston increased more than the national average rate in 2020 and 2021, increasing 44 percent⁶ and 18 percent, respectively.⁷ Domestic violence-related homicides drove these increases. From 2020 to 2021, domestic violence homicides rose by 50 percent and accounted for 81 percent of the total increase in homicides in 2021.⁸

To grapple with these challenges, Mayor Turner's administration established One Safe Houston,⁹ a violence reduction initiative aimed at improving public safety and reducing the harms of violent crime. Just five months after implementation, evidence suggests that One Safe Houston is working: As of May 31, 2022, all four

major categories of violent crime—homicide, robbery, rape, and aggravated assault—have decreased,¹⁰ with a 3 percent decrease in Houston’s homicide rate in particular.¹¹ Moreover, during the first quarter of 2022, 1,113 emergency calls were diverted from law enforcement to mental health response teams.¹²

1,113

Number of emergency calls in Houston diverted from law enforcement to mental health response teams in first quarter of 2022

Although One Safe Houston includes law enforcement and criminal legal system interventions, it stands out for its focus on public health-focused programs that aim to address the health-related, social, and behavioral factors that lead to crime. These include:

- **Community violence intervention:**¹³ To specifically intervene to break the cycle of gun violence, the Cure Violence¹⁴ and Credible Messenger Mentoring programs¹⁵ offer credible messengers—individuals directly affected by violence—in order to mitigate and de-escalate violence and provide young people with the resources and skills to make a change in their lives.
- **Domestic violence:** Domestic abuse response teams, composed of one officer and one trauma-informed victims advocate, provide support and resources to people in abusive situations.¹⁶ Houston’s Multicultural Domestic Violence Prevention Outreach Strategy relies on credible messengers to provide culturally competent resources and information related to domestic violence prevention to disrupt cycles of domestic violence driving homicides in the city.¹⁷
- **Mental health:** The Mobile Crisis Outreach Team consists of mental health professionals who respond independently to mental health crises,¹⁸ while the Crisis Intervention Response Team sends a licensed clinician with a specially trained officer to respond to these calls.¹⁹ These programs allow police to focus on serious crimes and ensure that people with the appropriate training in de-escalation and mental illness can connect people to the appropriate services.²⁰
- **Reentry:** With the support of the Houston Health Department, Harris County government, and community-based organizations, the Community Re-entry Network Program provides evidence-based programming such as life skills and job readiness for people reentering the community after incarceration and connects them to other government and community-based resources such as health insurance and transportation assistance.²¹

Boston: A youth-focused approach

Crime rates in Boston have been declining for the past 15 years.²² Although Boston saw five more homicides in 2020 than in 2019—a 10 percent increase—the city did not see the same rise in violent crime during the pandemic that other parts

of the country experienced.²³ And in 2021, violent and property crime decreased by 15 percent and 13 percent, respectively, from the previous year, marking the fifth consecutive year in which both violent and property crime declined.²⁴ The 15 percent decrease in violent crime was driven primarily by a 29 percent decrease in homicides and a 28 percent decrease in shooting incidents.²⁵

Hoping to prevent a second year of increased homicides during the summer months, Boston's then-acting Mayor Kim Janey (D) implemented a summer safety plan in 2021,²⁶ which focused primarily on strengthening community relationships, increasing opportunities for community engagement, and ensuring that communities have the resources they need. Boston's proactive, community-focused response successfully reversed the increase in homicides that occurred in the first summer of the pandemic.

This summer, current Boston Mayor Michelle Wu (D) has implemented a new summer safety plan²⁷ that includes and expands on many of Boston's violence reduction initiatives. Recognizing that young people are disproportionately involved in and affected by gun violence, many of Boston's initiatives focus on people between the ages of 10 and 25. Key components of Boston's violence reduction strategy include:

- **The Youth Development Fund:** This fund provides grants to community-based organizations to increase the “number and variety” of youth development opportunities across the city.²⁸ In 2021, the fund dispersed grants to 14 organizations to expand programming for 10- to 25-year-olds across the city.²⁹
- **Operation Exit:** Operation Exit is a three-week-long program designed to prepare gang-involved young people referred by a partner organization to transition to apprenticeship programs. The program has an 87 percent placement rate and provides job training, mentorship, case management, and placement services.³⁰
- **SuccessLink summer youth jobs program:** In partnership with nearly 200 community-based organizations, SuccessLink connects Boston youth ages 14–19 with summer employment opportunities and provides grants to organizations to cover the cost of employment.³¹
- **The Community Ambassador program:** This new program relies on teams of people with close community ties to engage individuals from historically underserved and underresourced neighborhoods and connect them with necessary resources and support.³²
- **Promotion of community events:** The city is improving 16 community parks³³ and investing public funds into small-scale grants to support community-led events across the city.³⁴

Newark: An ecosystem approach

Once known for its high rates of crime,³⁵ discriminatory police practices,³⁶ and police misconduct,³⁷ Newark is now lauded for its successful public safety reforms. The city’s efforts beginning in 2014, which have been called an “ecosystem” approach, rely on engagement from all community members to shift how the city achieves public safety—or, as Newark Mayor Ras Baraka (D) says, “put the public back in public safety.”³⁸

By 2019, homicides were at their lowest point since 1961.³⁹ Although Newark experienced a small increase in homicides and nonfatal shootings—6 percent and 13 percent, respectively—between 2020 and 2021,⁴⁰ these increases were significantly lower than the national trends. Additionally, rates of overall crime in 2020 were still 70 percent lower than in 2000.⁴¹ Homicides in Newark have also decreased more than 50 percent since 1990.⁴² Newark’s coordinated public safety response has brought about significant reductions in crime while improving relationships between law enforcement and the community.⁴³

Newark’s public safety ecosystem views all community stakeholders—law enforcement, Newark’s Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery, community violence prevention specialists, social workers, and more—as interdependent partners in creating a safe community and recognizes the importance of including initiatives outside law enforcement.⁴⁴ An ecosystem approach allows Newark to address the many factors that lead to crime simultaneously.⁴⁵ As a recent report on Newark’s public safety ecosystem explains, “Each organization is advancing an element of the ecosystem that makes people safe, fosters healing, and prevents violence.”⁴⁶

Below are some of the ways that community stakeholders have been engaging in the Newark public safety ecosystem:

- **Law enforcement:** Newark’s Trauma to Trust program,⁴⁷ led by Equal Justice USA,⁴⁸ approaches historical mistrust between police and the community head-on. The multiday program convenes law enforcement and community members to engage in discussions about race, trauma, violence, and inequity in order to foster mutual understanding and improve community-police relations.
- **Local government:** In 2020, Mayor Baraka created Newark’s Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery. Five percent of the city’s public safety funding has been allocated to support this office, which works to strengthen relationships throughout the public safety ecosystem and provide resources for both trauma recovery and workforce development.⁴⁹

[Newark’s] efforts ... rely on engagement from all community members to shift how the city achieves public safety.

- **Directly affected community members:** The Newark Community Street Team (NCST) is a community violence intervention that relies on directly affected, credible messengers to engage community members and prevent conflicts from rising to violence through mediation, casework support, safe passage support, and public safety roundtables.⁵⁰ Homicides continuously decreased after the introduction of the NCST in 2015, with an 11 percent, 12 percent, and 15 percent decrease in the following three years, respectively.⁵¹
- **Community organizations:** Newark’s decrease in violent crime and improvement in public safety is the result of the dedication of countless advocates and organizations that serve in a convening role.⁵² Individual community members play a critical role as they participate in roundtable discussions convened by Equal Justice USA and the NCST, share resources with those in need, raise concerns about public safety, and work to support reform efforts in the city.

Conclusion

Concerns about rising violence and public safety have persisted since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. However, a study of 27 U.S. cities revealed that the homicide rate rose by only 5 percent from 2020 to 2021⁵³—far less than the 29 percent increase the previous year. While every life lost to senseless gun violence is one too many, the slowing increase in homicides is cause for cautious optimism.

To stem increases in violent crime without perpetuating the harms of intentional community disinvestment; racial and economic inequity in access to resources and opportunities; and over-policing, city governments and leaders must work proactively with communities to develop approaches that look beyond law enforcement. Democratic leaders in Houston, Boston, and Newark offer tangible solutions that have paved the way for innovative, community-based responses that focus on prevention and ways to address root causes of crime. Leaders in other jurisdictions can learn from these cities’ holistic crime reduction efforts and the ways in which coordinated interventions across sectors can deliver community safety everyone deserves.

Endnotes

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