

Field Guide: Working Together: Community Violence Intervention Ecosystems

No single program or organization can carry a person from crisis to stability alone. Nor will a single program or organization alone move a person from abiding to the street code to a life free from violence. This guide summarizes the case for building—and joining—an ecosystem instead of going it alone.

Together Is Better: Why This Guide Exists

A single violence interrupter can defuse a conflict tonight. A single hospital-based program can catch a patient at their most receptive moment. A single school counselor can redirect a kid before a bad decision becomes a permanent one. Each of these efforts matters — and each one, working alone, is likely to eventually hit a wall it cannot get past by itself.

That wall might be a client who needs stable housing before street outreach can take hold. It might be a family that needs mental health support the intervention worker isn't trained to provide. It might be a city budget cycle that funds one program for eighteen months and then disappears. Violence is not caused by one thing, so it cannot be solved by one program, one sector, or one year of funding.

“Working together” is not a nice-to-have for CVI — it is the operating model that lets any single program succeed.

This is the idea behind a CVI ecosystem: a coordinated network of community-based organizations, city agencies, health systems, schools, and researchers who each play a distinct role — focused on the individuals at highest risk of violence — and grow stronger by leaning on one another's strengths. The rest of this guide unpacks what these ecosystems look like and how various practices and partnerships can encourage ecosystem development.

Who This Guide Is For

This guide speaks to four audiences at once, and each will get something different from it:

City leaders and policymakers — including mayors, city council members, and staff in Offices of Violence Prevention or Neighborhood Safety — will find the case for why fragmented, single-program approaches to violence prevention eventually hit structural limits. The guide explains what it takes to build the coordinating infrastructure that allows individual CVI programs to succeed, including shared data systems, sustainable multi-year funding, clearly defined roles, and mechanisms for cross-agency problem solving.

Community-based organizations, direct service providers, and frontline practitioners will find guidance on where their work fits within a broader CVI ecosystem. It also highlights the kinds of partnerships, referral

pathways, data-sharing practices, and role clarification that can help organizations connect more effectively without losing their distinct missions or community credibility.

Funders and philanthropic partners will find guidance on how funding decisions can either strengthen or fragment a CVI ecosystem. Funders can support ecosystem-building by investing in backbone infrastructure, shared training, data capacity, technical assistance, evaluation, and coordination in addition to direct service slots. They can also reduce competition among community-based organizations by encouraging collaborative proposals, aligning reporting requirements, and support multi-year grants.

Researchers and learning partners will find a framework for understanding CVI ecosystems as more than a set of individual program evaluations. The guide emphasizes the importance of studying coordination, implementation, referral pathways, service gaps, partnership quality, and community capacity — not only participant-level outcomes. Researchers can use the guide to think about how evidence-building can support real-time learning, strengthen practice, and help communities understand whether their broader ecosystem is becoming more connected, responsive, and sustainable.

An Ecosystem Framework

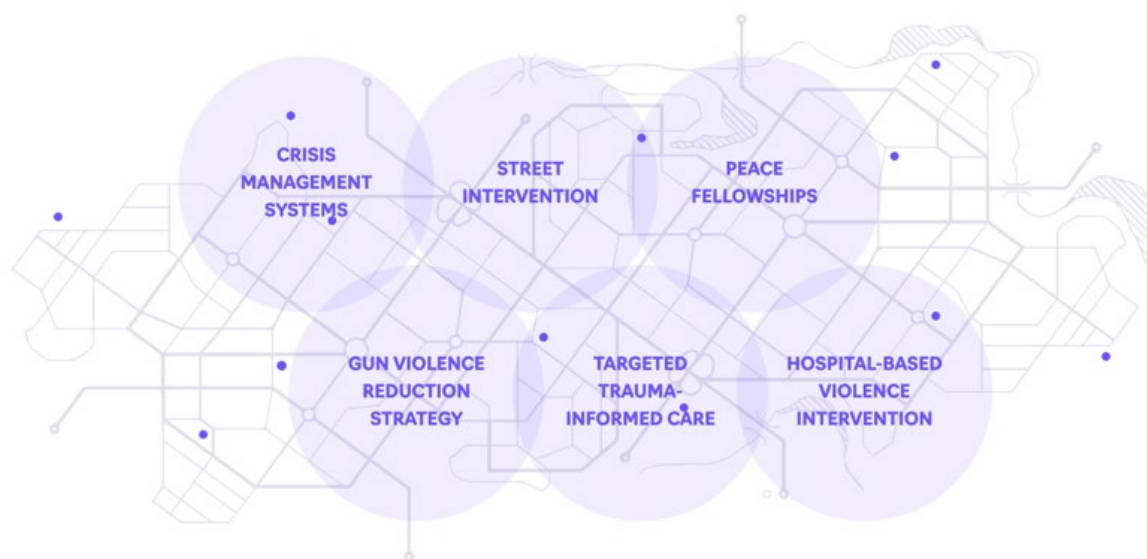


Figure 1. CVI Ecosystem as developed by Cviecosystem.org

The CVI Ecosystem framework is the most directly relevant framework for understanding how community violence intervention strategies fit together. The framework is housed at **CVIEcosystem.org**, a field-building resource developed by the Health Alliance for Violence Intervention (HAVI), the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR), the Community-Based Public Safety Collective, and Cities United. Together, these partners emphasize that cities need more than a set of individual CVI programs. They need a coordinated infrastructure that connects organizations, clarifies roles, supports referrals, shares data responsibly, strengthens the workforce, and sustains the work over time.

In this framework, city government often plays a stewardship role by helping establish a shared vision, investing in the backbone functions that allow coordination to happen, and ensuring that community-based organizations are not left to build the system on their own. Although the framework is often presented through several core strategies, the actual ecosystem is broader than a simple list of program types. The following kinds of work may all be part of a CVI ecosystem:

- Crisis Management
- Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Programs
- Life Coaching
- Street Outreach
- Victim Services
- Violence Interruption
- Neighborhood Stabilization
- Reentry Services
- School-Based Violence Intervention Programs
- Wraparound Services
- Youth Diversion

The key point is that these strategies are not interchangeable, and they are not all meant to serve the same population in the same way. Some are designed to interrupt imminent violence. Others focus on long-term stabilization, healing, service connection, reentry, youth development, or victim support. A strong CVI ecosystem helps these pieces work together so that people at highest risk are not forced to navigate disconnected programs on their own.

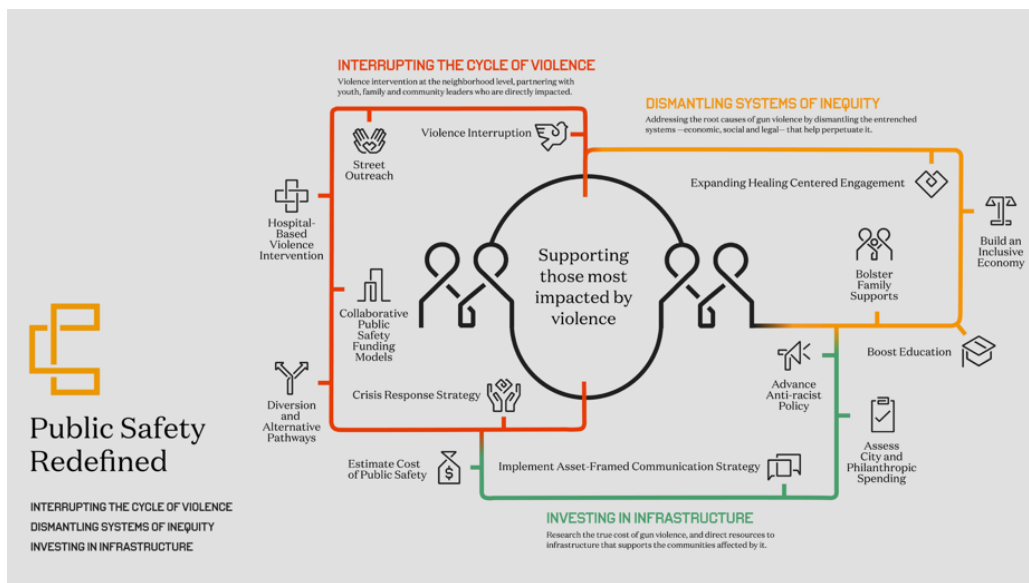


Figure 2. Cities United Public Safety Framework. Source: <https://www.citiesunited.org/downloadable-resources/public-safety-redefined>

Cities United's Public Safety Redefined

Cities United's Public Safety Redefined framework (Figure 2) is broader than the CVI ecosystem framework. It does not replace the CVI ecosystem; it helps show what must surround and support it. The framework organizes the work around three larger priorities: interrupting the cycle of violence, dismantling systems of inequity, and investing in infrastructure. That makes it especially useful for city leaders, funders, and public-sector partners who are thinking beyond individual CVI programs and asking what kind of public safety system they are trying to build.

Within this broader public safety frame, CVI is one essential part of the work. But Cities United also pushes the field to look upstream and across systems: strengthening family supports, expanding healing-centered engagement, building inclusive economies, improving education, advancing anti-racist policy, assessing city and philanthropic spending, and investing in research and infrastructure. In other words, the CVI ecosystem

is the intervention infrastructure closest to the violence; the public safety ecosystem is the larger civic infrastructure needed to make safety durable, equitable, and community-centered.

How Does Law Enforcement Fit Into CVI Ecosystems?

A common question from practitioners is whether “working together” means working with police. The honest answer is: it depends on the city, and it's usually more nuanced than a yes-or-no. Two examples show how differently this can play out — and how deliberately each city has had to define the relationship.

Baltimore, Maryland

Baltimore's ecosystem is built around community outreach, violence intervention and mediation, HVIPs, life coaching, and victim services. Critically, the city frames its CVI ecosystem as one part of a broader public safety approach that runs *alongside* — not underneath — a group violence reduction strategy (GVRS) that involves law enforcement (City of Baltimore, 2022). The two tracks are coordinated, but community-based intervention keeps its own identity and leadership.

Newark, New Jersey

Newark's model rests on four pillars: (1) the social and cultural identities and histories of residents, including grassroots leaders pushing for change; (2) community-led CVI strategies alongside work to address community trauma and healing from police violence; (3) political leadership that empowers community members; and (4) city- and state-level budgetary and policy support (NewarkSafety.org, 2023). Law enforcement enters this model in two specific, bounded ways: through dialogue and healing processes that address the trauma of police brutality, and through public safety roundtables where community members review and help decide on pressing safety concerns (Avila & Rengifo, 2022).

The throughline: neither city treats law enforcement as a component near the center of the ecosystem. Both treat it as one partner among many, with a clearly defined and community-accountable role.

What Does It Take to Build a CVI Ecosystem?

Building a CVI ecosystem is a shared responsibility, but it usually needs a clear backbone function so that coordination does not depend only on goodwill, informal relationships, or overextended program leaders. It's an ongoing practice of coordination across every level of government and many sectors of the community. In practice, this means coordination has to happen on two levels at once: *within* a single strategy (e.g., different street outreach teams staying in sync with each other) and *across* strategies (e.g., street outreach handing off cleanly to an HVIP). It also means reaching beyond CVI providers entirely to “CVI-aligned sectors — policy experts and researchers” (Community Violence Intervention Action Plan, 2024, p. 21).

Hence, responsibility for building a CVI ecosystem should not fall on any one program or sector alone. The work has to be collectively owned. At the same time, someone must be responsible for the backbone functions that make the ecosystem work: convening partners, clarifying roles, maintaining referral pathways, tracking gaps and duplication, supporting shared data and learning, and helping resolve conflicts when partners' responsibilities overlap. In many cities, this backbone role is best housed in a credible public or intermediary entity — such as an office of violence prevention, a trusted community-based intermediary, a coalition with staffing capacity, or a public-private partnership — but it must be accountable to the communities most affected by violence and respectful of the expertise of frontline CVI providers.

The Scope of the Work

The scope of ecosystem-building is broad because the needs of people at highest risk of violence rarely fit within one program model or service category. A strong CVI ecosystem may include street outreach, violence interruption, hospital-based violence intervention, crisis management, youth development, school-based intervention, victim services, reentry services, life coaching, neighborhood stabilization, and wraparound supports. Cities that have active CVI coalitions, can rely on the coalitions to help organize this work by bringing partners together across these strategies, but the larger goal is to ensure that the full network of supports is coordinated, accessible, and responsive to community needs. Sustaining this kind of ecosystem requires more than convening meetings. It requires:

- Joint strategy and policy decisions
- Sustainable, multi-year funding
- Professional training and technical assistance
- Data and resource sharing across organizations
- Advocacy and grant-writing support

Examples of Partnership in Practice to Build an Ecosystem

- Frontline workers becoming trainers for other community-based organizations, helping spread practice knowledge and strengthen the local workforce from within the field.
- Frontline workers directly shaping research design, evaluation questions, data collection tools, and worker benefits so that evidence-building reflects the realities of practice.
- CVI Coalitions convening CBOs, research institutions, and city agencies around a shared table to improve referrals, follow-up, and continuity of care after a violent injury.
- Youth-serving programs, CVI providers and schools working together to share information with about emerging conflicts, attendance concerns, and service needs while protecting confidentiality and avoiding punitive responses.
- CVI providers (or coalition) convening recurring meetings with staff Departments of Corrections so that people returning from incarceration have immediate support, not just referrals on paper.
- Victim services organizations and CVI programs coordinating to support people harmed by violence, including family members, witnesses, and survivors who may also be at risk of retaliation or future victimization.
- Researchers and practitioners co-developing dashboards, performance measures, or feedback loops that help programs see what is working, where participants are falling through the cracks, and what needs to be adjusted.
- City agencies and community partners jointly reviewing data on shootings, service access, referrals, and neighborhood conditions to identify gaps in the ecosystem and decide where additional capacity is needed.
- CBOs, public agencies, and technical assistance providers working together to strengthen administrative infrastructure, including data systems, supervision practices, fiscal management, and grant-writing capacity.

Where Government Comes In

Government's role in a CVI ecosystem is to help create the conditions for community-led violence intervention to succeed. That means funding the work sustainably, supporting training and technical assistance, building data and referral infrastructure, and removing barriers where government systems get

in the way. It also means using public authority to reform criminal justice processes, align city departments, and actively promote collaboration across CBOs, hospitals, schools, workforce agencies, victim services, and other partners. Offices such as Baltimore's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement, Philadelphia's Division of Safe Neighborhoods, and Louisville's Office of Violence Prevention show how local government can partner directly with CVI organizations while still recognizing that the work itself depends on trusted community-based leadership. National organizations and collaboratives, including Cities United, the CVI Action Plan partners, Giffords, Everytown for Gun Safety, and other field-building intermediaries, can support this work by providing training, policy guidance, advocacy, research, implementation tools, and technical assistance to local, state, and federal partners. In a strong ecosystem, government does not replace community leadership; it invests in it, coordinates around it, and helps clear the path for it to work.

Key Practices Worth Copying

- Clear, consistent public messaging and campaign strategy
- A shared directory of local CVI program resources
- Coalitions creating shared training spaces where outreach workers, case managers, hospital responders, victim advocates, and supervisors can build common language, clarify roles, and learn from one another.
- Warm referral and handoff protocols so participants do not have to navigate services alone
- Community residents and people with lived experience regularly leading and participating in planning tables so that ecosystem priorities are shaped by those most affected by violence, not only by institutions.
- Ecosystem leaders regularly assess whether institutional partners are dominating the agenda and make adjustments to preserve community leadership and shared power.
- Regular convenings of CBOs, researchers, and city agencies to review violence data
- Embedding young leaders directly within local government and CBOs
- Routine review of service gaps, duplication, and barriers to access
- Common performance measures that allow partners to track collective progress
- Clear plans for sustainability, leadership transitions, and continuity when grants or staff change
- Funding practices that reward coordination rather than competition among community-based organizations
- Funders aligning grant requirements, reporting expectations, and timelines so that community organizations are not pulled in competing directions by fragmented funding streams.
- Data-sharing agreements that protect privacy while supporting coordination

Where Does My Organization Fit Into a CVI Ecosystem?

You don't have to run a street outreach team to belong in this work. Use the questions and categories below to find your organization's natural entry point.

Do You Work Directly on Reducing Gun Violence?

- **Prevention programs** — school-based or afterschool programs that reduce risk factors and build protective factors among youth are not at the highest risk of being victims or perpetrators of gun violence.
- **Intervention programs** — direct work with individuals already at high risk or previously involved in gun violence.

Do You Support People and Programs Around the Edges?

Organizations that don't directly address gun violence are still vital to the ecosystem through partnership and coalition work.

- Direct services in trauma-informed care, mental health counseling, housing, legal support, employment, education, and mutual aid help meet participants' and families' full range of needs.
- Training providers build capacity in trauma-informed care, grant writing, financial management, mental health counseling, and medical first aid.
- Research institutions grow the evidence base through collaborative studies, training, and shared resources.

Are You a City Agency?

- Public schools are a critical space for reaching minors with prevention programming, which requires city support and funding for CBO partnerships.
- Public health departments structure the long-term resources — like HIVs — that intervention participants depend on.

Can You Advocate?

- Organizations, institutions, and nonprofits can pressure and guide elected officials toward violence-reduction policy.
- Advocacy is needed at the local, state, and federal level simultaneously — no single level of government can carry it alone.

Together Is Better: Your Next Step

Every organization in this guide started somewhere specific — one program, one contract, one relationship with a city office. What turned that single point into an ecosystem was a decision to actively look for the next connection.

- **Map yourself.** Identify where you already sit — prevention, intervention, wraparound support, city agency, research, or advocacy.
- **Find at least one missing link.** What does your program need that it cannot provide itself? Housing? Data? A warm handoff to another provider? That gap points to your next partnership.
- **Show up to the table.** Join or convene the local coalitions, roundtables, and data reviews already happening in your city — that's where ecosystems actually get built.

No one is asking any single organization to do it all. The whole point of an ecosystem is that you don't have to.

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