

A Qualitative Assessment of Violence Interrupter Experiences  
During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Chicago

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## Violence interruption during COVID-19 in Chicago

### 1. Introduction

The concept of violence interruption has its roots in Chicago. In 2000, public health practitioners from the University of Illinois at Chicago devised an initiative grounded in epidemic modeling coupled with situational crime prevention to address the city's violence. The Cure Violence (CV) program (formerly CeaseFire) drew parallels between infectious disease epidemiology and community violence; both shared three essential characteristics of contagion: clustering, spread, and transmission (Slutkin et al., 2014). Adapted from the World Health Organization guidelines, the CV model has three central components: (1) Detecting and interrupting violence; (2) Identifying and changing the thinking of the highest potential transmitters (i.e., those with the highest risk of committing violence); and (3) Changing group norms regarding violence (Slutkin et al., 2014).

The central players in implementing the CV model in the detection and interruption stage are Violence Interrupters (VI). These individuals are specifically trained in techniques to interrupt violence on the street level by preventing retaliatory shootings, mediating continuing conflict, and engaging in follow-ups to continue monitoring (Butts et al., 2015), thereby cutting off the "transmission" of violence. VIs are in advantageous positions to intervene in conflict, as they typically live in the neighborhoods they serve, are known to people who may be "high-risk," and in some cases, have been members of gangs or spent time incarcerated (Slutkin et al., 2014).

The effectiveness of the CV model on preventing gun violence in Chicago was apparent through early evaluations. In the West Garfield Park community area and eventually in five others, an average drop in shootings of 42% in the first year was observed (Ransford et al., 2010). In 2005, CV expanded to an additional eight community areas, and similarly, the resultant effect was an average 27% decrease in shootings in the first year (Ransford et al., 2010). During this period in Chicago, when shootings were increasing throughout the city, these reductions were particularly noteworthy (Slutkin et al., 2014). As CV gained recognition and expanded its national reach, protective effects of the program were supported by several independent evaluations in Chicago (Skogan et al., 2009), Baltimore (Webster et al., 2012), and New York (Picard-Fritsche & Cerniglia, 2013).

Despite the early and sustained observed benefits of CV in Chicago, by the 2010s, funding for the program at the state and local level dwindled, including the non-renewal of a 1-million-dollar grant from the Chicago Police Department in 2012 (Givens, 2017). Though there remain numerous committed VIs in the city, the lack of resources has caused the splintering of interruption efforts, with multiple decentralized outreach organizations operating around the city's south, west, and far north sides.

The city's remaining VIs would be tested in 2020, when on March 18, the City of Chicago (2020b) issued the first of a series of stay-at-home mandates, ordering individuals to shelter in place to avoid transmission and spread of COVID-19. As the year progressed and the realities of COVID-19 set in, several US cities, including Chicago, began to experience an uptick in gun-related

incidents (Sutherland, 2021). As such, the goal of the current study was to investigate the experiences of Chicago's VIs under the stresses of COVID-19.

## **2. Methods**

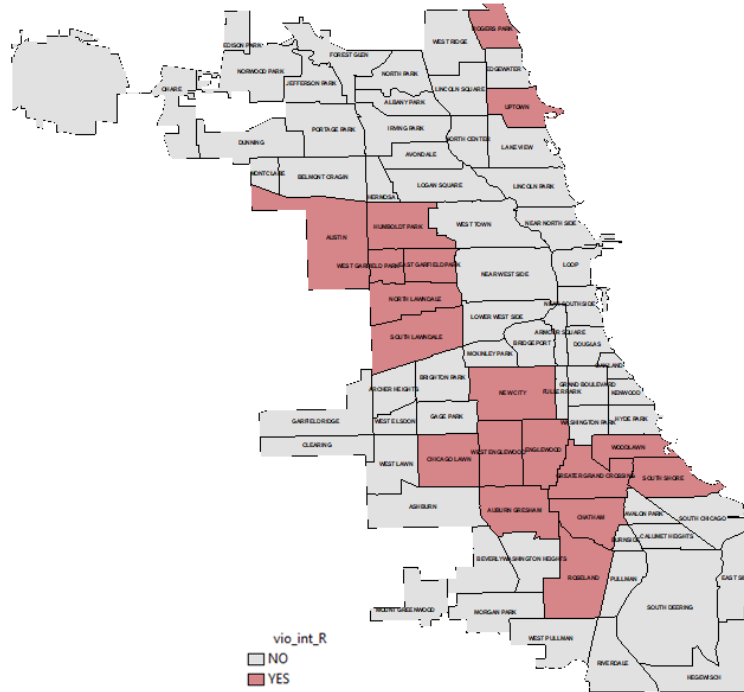
### **2.1. Measures**

Three qualitative interviews were conducted to investigate the experiences of Chicago's VIs during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the interviews allowed researchers to better understand how communities were dealing with elevated levels of violence. Recruiting was facilitated through partnership with a local community VI who was known to the authors. Interviews were approximately thirty to sixty minutes in length via the Zoom platform. The participants were from two organizations that routinely engage in violence interruption activities – two interviewees were from Institute for Non-Violence Chicago and one from Target Area Development. Interviewees worked with three distinct communities in Chicago: Greater Englewood, West Garfield Park, and New City. The interview comprised 13 questions. The first half of the questions asked the interviewees to introduce themselves, describe their role(s), organization, and how gun violence impacted their community. The remaining questions were related to how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their work and their impressions of gun violence in Chicago. Some of the key questions asked were:

- When the Stay-at-Home order was activated, did people in the community take shelter?
- Were street feuds placed on pause during the Stay-at-Home order?
- How do you feel the pandemic has impacted violence in Chicago?
- Can you describe anything that you found frustrating about current efforts to reduce gun violence?
- Are there multiple organizations involved in resolving gun violence in the communities you work in?

Additionally, interviewees identified organizations that do similar work with violence interruption and outreach, such as Acclivus, Alliance of Local Services (ALSO), Chicago CRED, Enlace, New Life, READI Chicago, Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), and UCAN. This information was utilized to distinguish community areas in Chicago where violence interrupters had a presence (n = 18; Figure 1). Media articles were also used to determine VI's presence.

Figure 1. Chicago community areas (N = 77) by presence of Violence Interrupters (n = 18)



## 2.2. Analysis

A Thematic Analysis was used to analyze the VI interviews. According to Braun et al. (2006, p. 78), a thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool that can potentially provide a rich and detailed yet complex account of data. Two members of the research team collaborated on the analysis. The process began by reviewing interview transcripts, developing emerging themes, and then defining and naming the themes. Seven emerging themes arose using this methodological approach:

1. Transition of working roles
2. Rebellious behaviors
3. Evolution of inner-city norms
4. Neighborhood Identity / Interconnectedness of neighborhood
5. Generating opportunities
6. Compassionate techniques / Trauma-informed Care
7. Connection to resources

## 3. Results

One consistent theme that arose across all interviews was Neighborhood Identity. VIs had deep-rooted ties to the neighborhoods in which they worked. These ties provided powerful motivation to engage in community-based interruption work. Other themes emerged around generating opportunities, connection to resources, and compassionate techniques. Interviewees felt that before

the pandemic, their neighborhoods were already impacted by the lack of opportunities such as sustained employment and after-school activities. The limited access to these resources left the youth with an abundance of free time due to the pandemic. Conversely, interviewees felt that due to lack of institutional trust, neighborhood youth felt hesitant with connecting with offered resources. Interviewees postulated that the reasoning behind the lack of engagement and mistrust among youth was due to the numerous negative interactions with police. Interviewees noted their exposure to trauma-informed care in violence interruption. The interviewees strongly felt that the police could benefit from practicing "compassionate techniques."

The theme of transition of working roles emerged when interviewees were asked how the pandemic impacted Chicago's gun violence. Interviewees described how their roles as VIs changed. Their operational framework became essential to the communities they serve by ensuring vulnerable residents remained physically healthy throughout the pandemic, by distributing free hygiene and food to residents. According to this interviewee from Target Area, the pandemic has:

*"impacted the neighborhood...tremendously because the people who are the ones that was outside... where the ones that probably should have been inside...we had to become essential workers so now you know, that puts a stress on my family."*

The identified theme of rebellious behaviors surfaced when interviewees were asked if street feuds paused during the Stay-at-Home order. Interviewees stated that often youth did not stay inside because they "Do not like to be told what to do." The interviewee from the Institute for Non-Violence Chicago said that:

*"I think [like] the guys [that] normally probably would stay in, or normally would find something else to do.... they was told that they had to stay in, so it's like a rebellious type thing: 'I'm gonna go out because they think I can't go out.'"*

Lastly, interviewees expressed working with the youth is challenging because they tend to have different perspectives on how conflicts should be resolved. When interviewees were asked to describe any frustrations about the current efforts to reduce gun violence, the interviewee from Target Area stated:

*"I just think like, if it was certain other resources that we could really give them like right then and there. We gotta change the norm. We got to change the mindset like violence is gonna keep happening until you change [the youth] mindset. It is too normal to pick up a gun and shoot somebody. When that's not normal."*

In addition to youth having different perspectives on mediating conflict, social norms and expectations for youth have changed, specifically for the women. The interviewee from the Institute for Non-Violence Chicago stated that:

*"Sometimes females, you know, they are underestimated...they feel they have to prove a point and feel they could do just as many things as um guys can do... a lot of young women selling drugs, it's a lot of women that are actually helping to do the drive as well."*

#### 4. Discussion

The VI interviews provided unique insights into the stress of street-level outreach in Chicago during the COVID-19 pandemic. From a citywide perspective, VI interviews provided essential context explaining the constraints of their work during the pandemic in Chicago. VIs most notably described how their roles expanded beyond violence mediation; they were tasked with being central points-of-contact for individuals in their communities, assisting with economic hardships and food insecurity, and providing diversion during school closures. Though these circumstances and responsibilities were not necessarily unique to the pandemic, the tone of urgency for community care was palpable during the interviews. In full consideration of the context and social climate, VIs adopted expanded roles while facing: racial and economic disparities of COVID-19 rates, civil unrest sparked by police violence and mistrust, and the eve of a divisive presidential election.

Despite these challenges, there was optimism among the VIs. In April 2020, just weeks into the pandemic, Chicago's Office of the Mayor announced a multi-million-dollar investment into funding several of the city's community-based street outreach and VI organizations in communities at the highest risk for violence. The statement released by the city emphasized a data-driven public health approach to addressing community violence. This was consistent with the city's recent prevention-oriented outlook on violence (City of Chicago, 2020d). Additionally, Office of the Mayor conceded that, "the City had historically never tracked the funding resources, stability and support needs of each community-based organization to identify gaps in services, areas of improvement or resource demands within each neighborhood and community." (City of Chicago, Office of the Mayor, 2020). It is the VI's hope that services will move towards being embedded as a structural aspect of Chicago violence prevention work.

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