

REIMAGINING SAFE COMMUNITIES: Coordinating Violence Prevention to Help California Thrive

Andrea Feniger | June 20, 2024



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violence prevention initiatives within California's State government attempt to tackle symptoms of violence but they lack a coordination and a collective vision. At the same time, many of California's local jurisdictions are taking innovative and visionary action to coordinate and align efforts to support safe and equitable communities through holistic programming. The State of California has an opportunity to follow the lead of its local communities and forge a new path by building and aligning around a shared vision for safe and equitable communities that centers justice and community health, instead of relying on the historically harmful approach of using law enforcement and carceral punishment as primary tools for violence prevention.

From January to May 2024, the author conducted stakeholder interviews, literature review, and policy analysis to understand how the state of California does and can coordinate violence prevention work to build safe and equitable communities across the state. This research led to the following recommendations:

1. Create a statewide strategic vision for safe and equitable communities.

- 1a.** Consult relevant departments to encourage an alignment behind this vision.
- 1b.** Consult external stakeholders to ensure community voices are centered.

2. Create an Office of Safe & Equitable Communities in the State of California with a mandate and authority to convene relevant departments.

- 2a.** Designate a representative from each department to serve as a liaison to the Office of Safe & Equitable Communities.

3. Empower localities to build and implement violence prevention programs that reflect the needs of their individual, unique communities.

- 3a.** Treat existing local offices as pilot programs.
- 3b.** Mandate the State Office of Safe & Equitable Communities to offer funding, administrative, and programmatic support to ensure longevity and success.

REPORT BACKGROUND

The author wrote this report for the Safe and Equitable Communities Roundtable of the California Health in All Policies (HiAP) Taskforce, in close partnership with State of Equity (a program of the Public Health Institute) and with guidance from Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice, the California Strategic Growth Council, and the Alliance for Boys and Men of Color. This report builds on Rebecca Brownlee's 2021 report [Beyond Violence Prevention](#)¹ by identifying solutions to the established problem of a decentralized and uncoordinated approach to violence prevention in California built upon an outdated narrative of individual responsibility and carceral punishment.

Defining Violence

This report uses the Los Angeles County Office of Violence Prevention's definition of violence as "any human action that harms or threatens to harm people physically or psychologically."² This includes a wide range of harms including gun violence, intimate partner violence, and violence at the hands of public institutions such as law enforcement and carceral systems.

While violence prevention efforts often focus on publicly reported violent crime, it is important to note that [as little as 41.5% of violence actually gets reported](#).³ Additionally, violence committed by public institutions is not typically reported in these contexts.

Research Methods

The author used Eugene Bardach's Eightfold Path, which is the recommended policy analysis method of the University of California, Berkeley Goldman School of Public Policy, to conduct this research and create the recommendations. The method includes the following steps: 1) Define the problem, 2) Assemble evidence, 3) Construct alternatives, 4) Select criteria, 5) Project outcomes, 6), Confront trade-offs, 7) Decide, 8) Tell your story.

¹ Brownlee, *Beyond Violence Prevention*, (State of Equity, 2021)

² Los Angeles County Office of Violence Prevention, page 10.

³ Gramlich, *What the data says about crime in the U.S.* (Pew Research Center, 2024)

Research used as the input into this method included:

- Individual interviews with 17 key stakeholders. Interviewees included employees of the State of California, employees of county and city offices of violence prevention, employees of non-profit organizations, activists, and researchers.
- Literature review.
- Analysis of current violence prevention programs and policies.
- Three feedback sessions: one with key informants to this report, one with members of the California Safe & Equitable Communities Roundtable, and one with representatives from State of Equity, The Strategic Growth Council, and Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice. During each session, attendees were invited to give feedback to the author on her findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several themes arose during the 17 interviews and literary review for this project. Themes include:

- Public health must be centered in violence prevention work.
- “Nothing about us without us,” meaning that the communities impacted by policy should be instrumental in informing that policy. This idea calls for robust community consultation and participation.
- State government is positioned to build a collective framework around safe and equitable communities and offer resources and support to localities.
- Local jurisdictions are best suited to engage with communities to build trust and develop programs unique to their needs.
- This work requires long term investment with a focus on data collection and narrative building.

The following recommendations reflect the themes above. They are interconnected and would be most impactful in tandem.

Recommendation 1: Create a statewide strategic vision for safe and equitable communities.

- 1.a** Consult external stakeholders to ground this vision in community voices and priorities.

- 1.b Consult relevant departments to encourage alignment behind this shared vision.

External and Community Stakeholders

Currently, each entity within the California State Government with a violence prevention program has its own individually crafted policy perspectives and success metrics. Creating a shared strategic vision will encourage collaboration and alignment, supporting more holistic and impactful work.

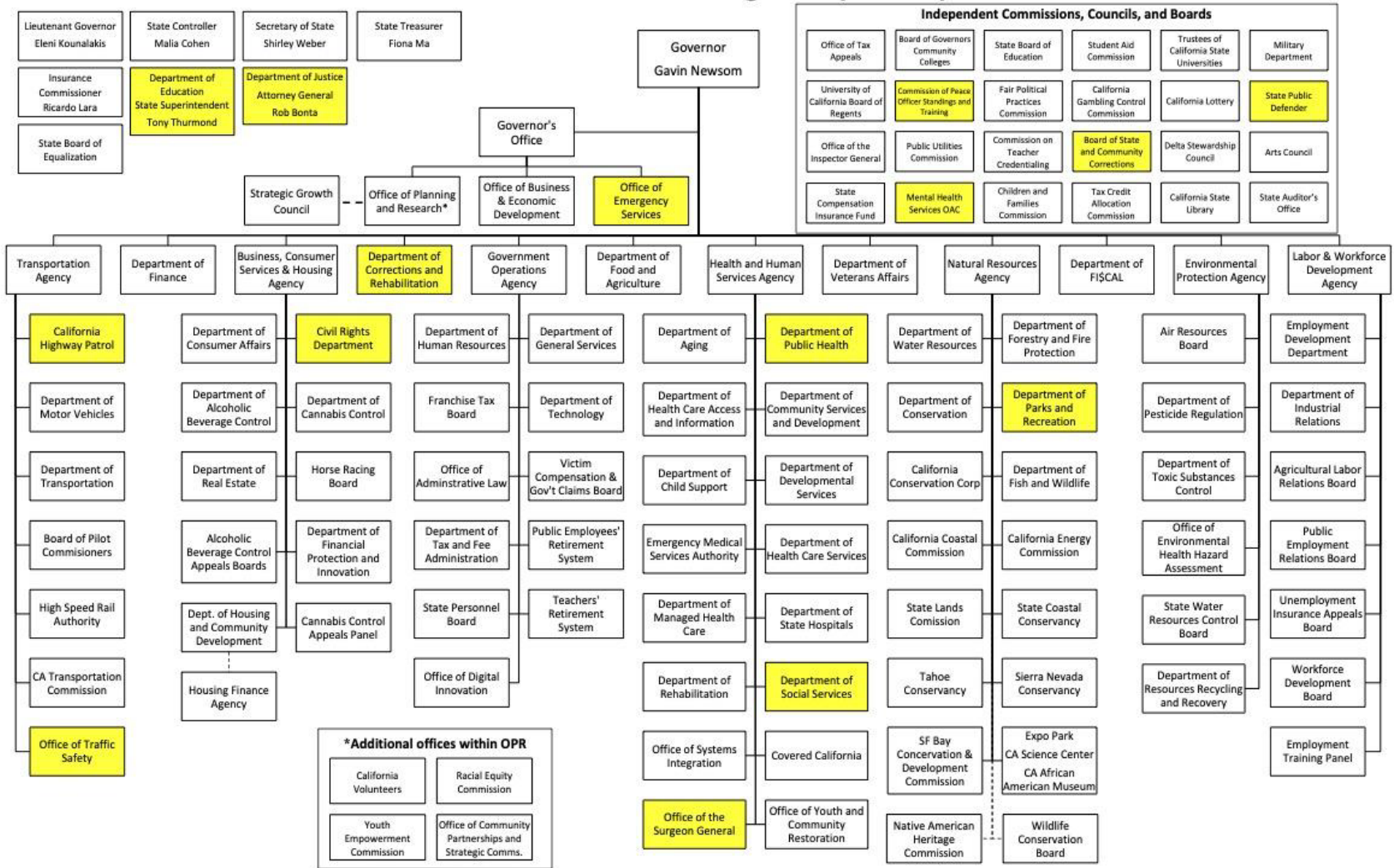
It is important that relevant stakeholders, both internally and externally, are consulted in creating this vision. California has a chance to align around a shared vision for safe and equitable communities that centers justice and community health. With a topic as personal and traumatic as violence, centering community voices is paramount. Building safe and equitable communities will require trust and participation from those closest to them. A wide range of local governments, nonprofit and community-based organizations, and individuals are already doing work on the ground to build safe and equitable communities. Their perspective and partnership will be invaluable when crafting a strategic vision.

The Siloed Nature of State Government Violence Prevention Work

The highlighted boxes in Figure 1 represent entities within the California State government with dedicated programs intended to prevent, reduce, or mitigate violence. Interviews with government staff indicate that these programs are administered separately without meaningful coordination or collaboration. Not only are these programs scattered across state government, but their distribution shows the breadth of entities that have identified a need for violence prevention work.

As of this report, at least fifteen entities within California state government have an explicit violence prevention, reduction, or mitigation program. This does not include those that do vital work that prevents violence but do not use that language to define their work. For example, an urban forestry program may help reduce violence by providing thoughtfully designed green spaces in a community.

CA State Government Org Chart (FY 2023)



Updated 2/13/2024

For internal tracking purposes only

Organizations < 30 FTE not shown

Figure 1: Org Chart of Violence Prevention Work in California, State of Equity, 2024

Due to the interconnected nature of violence, racism, and poverty, all state agencies and departments have a role in preventing violence and supporting safe and equitable communities. The lack of a coherent and shared vision and policies across all of California state government hinders California's efforts to build safe and equitable communities for all.

Convening and resourcing these bodies to encourage alignment behind a shared strategic vision will help build safer and more equitable communities across California.

"In a perfect world, there would be someone with a birds eye view really helping counties understand what violence prevention could look like."

-Julia Marmolejo Muruato,
Coordinator, STRYVE Youth
Violence Prevention Program,
Monterey County

Recommendation 2: Create an Office of Safe & Equitable Communities in the State of California with a mandate and authority to convene relevant departments.

- 2.a** Designate a representative(s) from each department to serve as a liaison to the Office of Safe & Equitable Communities.

To ensure alignment and success, there needs to be a designated body to lead this work and convene stakeholders. An Office of Safe & Equitable Communities would need authority to convene departments and have access to those with decision making power in state government. With those qualities in mind, the author recommends the Strategic Growth Council serve as the home for the Office of Safe & Equitable communities but acknowledges the important role the California Department of Public Health must play.

Requiring that relevant departments designate a liaison(s) to the Office of Safe & Equitable Communities encourages alignment and reflects the reality of the varied programs and initiatives that prevent violence and support safe and equitable communities.

Structuring the Office of Safe & Equitable Communities

The author recommends the Strategic Growth Council (SGC) serve as the home of the Office of Safe & Equitable Communities. is made up of seven cabinet secretaries and

three public members appointed by the governor, state assembly, and state senate. Their mission is to “to coordinate and work collaboratively with public agencies, communities, and stakeholders to achieve sustainability, equity, economic prosperity, and quality of life for all Californians.”¹ SGC’s access to executive leadership, convening experience, and connections with diverse stakeholders in state government make them uniquely qualified to take on the role of coordinating violence prevention work across entities. SGC has a reputation as a space for innovation, has a track record of positive partnerships with community and advocacy groups, has previously worked on public health initiatives, and leads the Health in All Policies Task Force.

Interviewees almost unanimously agreed that a public health approach was necessary to build safe & equitable communities. It is important to acknowledge the expertise and relationships that the California Department of Public Health contributes to the effort to build safe and equitable communities, and the California Department of Public Health should play a special role in guiding the Office of Safe and Equitable Communities. However, while some stakeholders suggested placing the Office in the Department of Public Health, the author is concerned that could reinforce the misguided view that violence prevention is exclusively the work of the Department of Public Health and does not need to be integrated across all of government, continuing the status quo of fractured approaches across state government.

Every State Entity has a Role to Play

Historically, violence prevention and violence response have been supported by

“We are not here to take over what you are doing, we are here to coordinate to make everyone’s jobs easier and make connections that might not already exist to support our common goals.”

-Kelly Fischer
Deputy Director, L.A. County
Office of Violence Prevention

separate entities. Violence prevention work has fallen squarely on the California Departments of Public Health and Social Services while violence response has focused on law enforcement and punishment, with programs at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Department of Justice, and local Police Departments. Ideally all departments can and should play an

integral role in building safe communities. Following are a few examples of how California state departments not traditionally engaged in this work are relevant to violence prevention:

- **California Department of Parks and Recreation:** [Research](#) shows that one's physical environment, including access to green spaces like parks, is directly linked to their mental development and feeling of safety. A study found that in 301 U.S. cities, increased access to green spaces at the neighborhood level was associated with decreased violent crime.⁴
- **California Department of Housing & Community Development:** [A Federal Bank of Kansas City researcher](#) estimates that housing assistance without preconditions lowers crime, and even pays for itself in under two years.⁵
- **California Department of Healthcare Services:** [A main driver for armed robberies is substance use disorder](#)⁶. The California Department of Healthcare Services offers treatment and works with localities to offer resources to those struggling with substance use disorder.
- **California Department of Education:** [Studies show](#) that universal school-based programs that teach students social skills such as emotional regulation, self-confidence, and conflict resolution decrease rates of violence amongst school-aged children in every grade level.⁷
- **California Department of Transportation:** The regional transportation authority tasked with coordinating transit services in Chicago [led a program to provide pre-loaded transit passes to non-profits who would then distribute the passes to survivors of domestic violence](#). Surveys conducted on pass recipients found that access to affordable public transportation allowed victims to gain stability that

⁴ Ogletree, Lincoln. Larson, Powell. White, Brownlee, *Urban greenspace linked to lower crime risk across 301 major U.S. cities*, (Cities, Volume 131) 2022

⁵ Cohen, *The Effect of Housing First Programs on Future Homelessness and Socioeconomic Outcomes* (Kansas City Federal Reserve Bank) 2022

⁶ Willis, *Armed Robbery: Who Commits it and Why?* (Australian Institute of Criminology 2006)

⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Effectiveness of Universal School-Based Programs for the Prevention of Violent and Aggressive Behavior. MMWR 2007

allowed them to maintain separation from their abusers and protected them from classic abuse tactics like slashing tires.⁸

These examples are meant to show the importance of cross-departmental participation in the effort to build safe & equitable communities. There are several strategies that the government can use to prevent violence, and it will take a combination of all of them to reach California's highest potential for safety and equitable communities.

Recommendation 3: Empower localities to build and implement violence prevention programs that reflect the needs of their individual, unique communities.

- 3.a** Treat existing local offices as pilot programs.
- 3.b** Mandate the State Office of Safe & Equitable Communities to offer funding, administrative, and programmatic support to ensure longevity and success.

The communities that are most impacted by violence will have the most clarity about the problems and their solutions. More than 75% of interviewees expressed the importance of community engagement and trust in the work to build safe and equitable communities. Because of the diversity of California communities and the inherent vulnerability of violence related work, it is important to empower localities to develop programs that work toward the state's strategic vision for safe and equitable communities that reflect their unique realities.

Building safe and equitable communities is a long-term project. Short term funding that expires before the programs will have the opportunity to display their impact would be detrimental. Engaging communities to build these programs and then quickly sunsetting funding will break down the trust required to be successful. Violence Prevention work needs to be funded consistently year to year and not treated as a short-term pilot.

“[Violence Prevention] is a long term investment. This work is complex and not always linear. This is upstream work; it is more than a quick initiative and a photo op.”

-Anonymous Public Health Official

⁸ Regional Transit Authority. How survivors of gender-based violence are using transit passes provided by the RTA, 2024.

Follow the Lead of Local Jurisdictions

California's local jurisdictions provide great models for what the State could do. [Seven California cities and one county have violence prevention offices registered with the National Office of Violence Prevention Network.](#)⁹ Even more have smaller, more targeted programs, such as the STRYVE Youth Violence Prevention Program in Monterey County.

Many local violence prevention offices, including in Los Angeles County and Oakland, rely on collaboration to carry out their work. Key informants expressed that they found success in bringing various stakeholders to the table to collaborate meaningfully by demonstrating the benefits of this work to everyone involved.

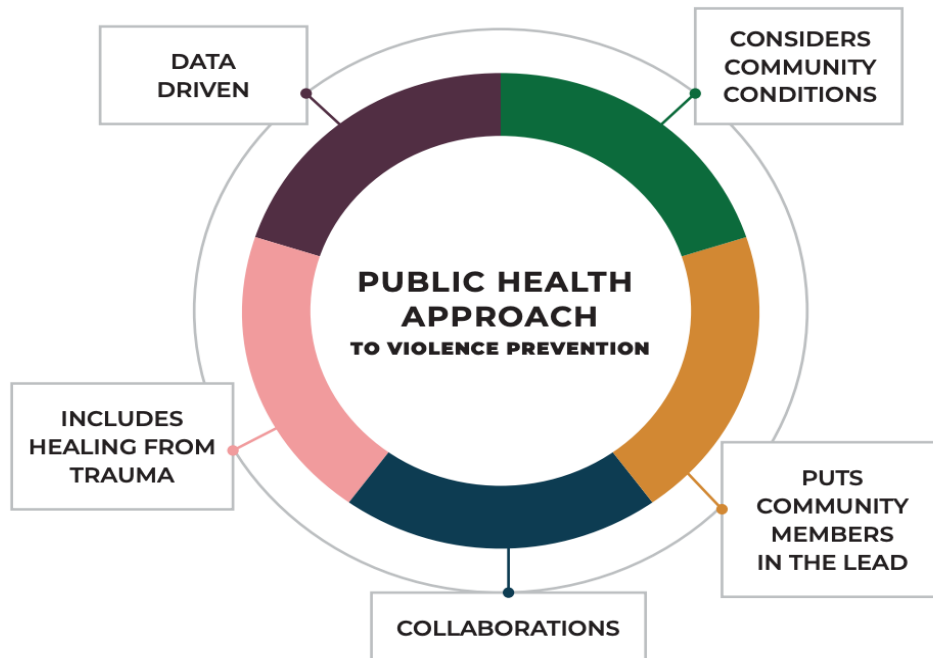


Figure 2: Oakland Department of Violence Prevention

Because of the robust local offices operating around California, the state already has baked-in pilot projects to learn from. The Los Angeles County Office of Violence

⁹ Office of Violence Prevention Network

Prevention has a staff of 38+ with a wide breadth of programs and sophisticated data collection.¹⁰ The state can bypass a pilot short-term funding model by treating this and other local offices as pilots that have already been operating for years.

To ensure localities are willing and able to meaningfully participate in this work, the state Office of Safe & Equitable Communities should be poised to provide financial resources and administrative support. This support would come in the form of tools to develop programs, collect data, and craft narratives.

The Office of Safe & Equitable Communities can provide localities with a roadmap to developing their own offices. They should plan to serve as a long-term partner to localities as they take on the task of building and implementing violence prevention programs.

Prevention in any form is complex to measure – it may not be possible to measure final outcomes in the short-term, but it is possible to track processes and systems that lead to preferred outcomes.¹¹ Because of the complexity and importance of collecting data on violence prevention efforts, it will require a central collection point in the Office of Safe & Equitable Communities and data sharing agreements among partner agencies.

It is important to use the data collected to build narratives that show the benefits of resourcing violence prevention. Showing the impacts of these programs through both quantitative and qualitative data will garner more community participation and trust.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” - Benjamin Franklin

Violence in California: Why prevention?

Effective violence prevention efforts focus on addressing root causes, taking a broad societal approach to improving the conditions in which people live and how they are included in their communities. This is in stark contrast to California's typical approach of

¹⁰ <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/ovp/>

¹¹ Woodbury. *Measuring Prevention*, (Homeland Security Affairs 1, Article 7, 2005)

responding to violence after it occurs by incarcerating or indebting the perpetrator, which often perpetuates violence further. Prevention spares at least two individuals from the consequences of a violent act, including both the victim(s) from experiencing violence and the perpetrator(s) from entering our penal system. Often the distinction between victim and perpetrator is not a clean line – our current system continues a cycle of violence [because violent crime victims have been shown to be more likely than others to later engage in violence](#).¹²

There is ample evidence about violence rates and the disproportionate impacts in California that display how our current approach could be improved by implementing strong violence prevention programs instead of relying heavily on intervention after the fact. Programs that get to the root causes of violence, such as racism, substance use disorder, poverty, and the ability to quickly and easily obtain a firearm could make a significant difference in preventing violence.

In California, [Black people are incarcerated at a rate 9.5 times higher than white people](#).¹³ Men who grew up in the [poorest 10 percent of American families are 20 times more likely to be imprisoned by their early 30s than men from the richest 10 percent](#) of families.¹⁴ A criminal record makes breaking the cycle of poverty that much more difficult; of those with a criminal record, [only a little more than half of former prisoners have any earnings and the rest make less than the earnings of a full-time job at the minimum wage on average](#),¹⁵ ultimately making breaking the cycle of violence and incarceration less likely.

[Young people of color also disproportionately feel the impact of violence as victims](#).¹⁶ Victims of violent crime are more likely to be low-income, Latino or African American, and under the age of 30.

¹² The Overlap Between Those Committing Offenses Who Also Are Victims: One Class of Crime Victim Rarely Seeks or Receives Available Services

¹³ *California Profile* (Prison Policy Institute)

¹⁴ Looney, *5 facts about prisoners and work, before and after incarceration* (Brookings Institution, 2018)

¹⁵ Looney & Turner, *Work and opportunity before and after incarceration*, (Brookings Institution, 2018) 3

¹⁶ *California Crime Victims' Voices* (Californians for Safety and Justice), 5

It would be impossible to discuss the causes of and responses to violence in California without acknowledging the stark disparities in who is impacted, particularly by the law enforcement and carceral system. Institutional racism in law enforcement and the carceral system is a key driver of these disparities. For example, in 2017 researchers at the University of Michigan and University of California, Irvine reported that [Black people in the U.S. are about five time more likely to go to prison for drug possession and 12 times more likely to be wrongfully convicted of drug crimes than white people](#), despite both groups using illegal drugs at about the same rate.¹⁷

These sobering statistics lay bare the reality that relying on intervention after violence has occurred is not serving Californians of any demographic. There is robust data to support the idea that current violence response mechanisms are not effective at preventing violence. It is failing Californians who perpetrate violence and who fall victim to violence, and those who oftentimes find themselves fitting both of those descriptions.

Violence Prevention Works

One of the most powerful examples of violence prevention in action is gun safety laws. The states that have implemented stricter gun safety laws [have demonstrably less gun deaths than states that have not](#).¹⁸ California has [the strongest gun safety laws in the United States](#), yet most of these laws focus on access and punishment.¹⁹ Expanding our understanding of gun safety programs to include initiatives that not only make it harder to access a firearm, but address the root causes that may lead to use of a firearm if acquired. Cities in California and around the country have seen the results of such prevention initiatives. [Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and New York City have all seen homicides and violence trend down after adopting comprehensive and collaborative violence prevention initiatives](#).²⁰

¹⁷ Gross, Possley, & Stephens. *Race and Wrongful Convictions in the United States*. 2017.

¹⁸ *Firearm Mortality by State* (Center for Disease Control, 2021)

¹⁹ *California Gun Laws*, Giffords Law Center

²⁰ *Violence Prevention Works: The Case for a Public Health Approach to Preventing Violence* (Prevention Institute)

Figure 1

Conclusion

While violence affects the well-being of nearly every person either directly or indirectly, the State of California's response is often fractured and short-sighted.

Multiple government agencies and departments in California have offices and programs that attempt to tackle different symptoms of violence but there is no shared, state-level vision of a just, safe, and healthy society to work toward together.

The work to build safer and more equitable communities is already being funded and worked on at high levels but without organization or a strategic vision. Coordinating and aligning these efforts means more impactful work.

A truly successful project to prevent violence will require a strategic vision for the state to align behind, a coordinated effort at the state level, participation from diverse stakeholders, and a centering of community voices in program development.

California has the opportunity to pioneer state level violence prevention work and reimagine what it means to build safe and equitable communities that allow its residents to thrive. It is time for California to forge a new path by aligning around a shared vision of safe communities that centers justice and community health instead of the historically harmful approaches of the past.



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Appendix 1: Individual Interview Question Guide

1. Can you explain in your own words the work that you do?
2. What do you see as the state of California's current role in violence prevention?
 - a. What role do you think they should play?
3. What role should localities play in violence prevention work?
4. What value, if any, do you think would be added from coordinating violence prevention programs?
5. What is the biggest hurdle to preventing violence in California?
6. Can you share examples of state initiatives that were in your opinion successful/not successful?
 - a. What made them successful/ not successful?
7. Do you encounter skepticism when advocating for violence prevention work?
 - a. What are common concerns and hesitations you encounter people expressing around violence prevention work?
8. Who else would you recommend I try to speak with?

Appendix 2: Discussion Questions During Feedback Presentations

1. What would be the right home for a state office of violence prevention?
2. What language best represents this work?
 - a. Should the office be called The Office of Violence Prevention or The Office of Safe & Equitable Communities?
3. Should the state mandate localities to create offices?