

EVIDENT CHANGE

Inform Systems. Transform Lives.



**OVER 15 YEARS
OF CREATING
INNOVATIVE
SOLUTIONS TO
GUN VIOLENCE**

**THE CITY OF RICHMOND,
CALIFORNIA**

**OFFICE OF NEIGHBORHOOD
SAFETY**

OCTOBER 2023

CONTENTS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ONS History and Purpose 1

ONS Staffing and Services 2

ONS Results and Impacts 5

What’s Next for ONS 7

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PHOTO CREDIT

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ABOUT EVIDENT CHANGE

Evident Change promotes just and equitable social systems for individuals, families, and communities through research, public policy, and practice. For more information, call (800) 306-6223, visit us at EvidentChange.org, or follow us on social media at Linktr.ee/EvidentChange.

ONS HISTORY AND PURPOSE

In the early to mid-2000s, gun violence and homicides climbed substantially in the City of Richmond, California. In 2006, the city recorded a 12-year high of 42 homicides—reflecting a rate of 42 homicides per 100,000 residents, much higher than the statewide average of 6.9 homicides per 100,000 residents.¹

To address this growing crisis, an innovative, research-based strategy was created. In 2006, the City Council established the Office of Violence Prevention (OVP)—widely believed to be the first such city government office in the country—to take the lead in responding to this critical issue from a public health perspective.

Using a community-centered, participant-driven approach grounded in positive youth development, ONS draws on and adapts components of other violence reduction models and introduces new strategies to appropriately address local needs.

As a first step for the OVP, a consulting team from The Mentoring Center (an Oakland-based nonprofit) led a comprehensive planning process to assess Richmond’s existing violence prevention services and identify gaps, review local crime trends and national best practices in violence prevention, and develop recommendations to reduce gun violence in the city.

As a result of the team’s recommendations, the OVP was transformed into the Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS), which, like the OVP, was considered the first of its kind in the nation² and created as a city department housed in the city manager’s office. ONS began operating in October 2007, with a goal of reducing—and ultimately eliminating—gun violence and associated homicides in Richmond.

Using a community-centered, participant-driven approach grounded in positive youth development, ONS draws on and adapts components of other violence reduction models, such as Cure Violence,³ and introduces new strategies to appropriately address local needs. ONS intervenes and engages with youth and young adults identified as most likely to commit acts of gun violence and/or be victims of gun violence, and it supports these individuals with intensive mentoring and connection to services. ONS also provides prevention services to young people at risk of involvement in gun violence.

ONS partners with numerous key groups and individuals who champion and support its work. This includes receiving vital funding and in-kind support from the City of Richmond as well as partnering with youth-serving community-based organizations to provide services. Also critical to ONS’s growth and sustainability is funding provided by state and federal government agencies, foundations, and private donors.

¹ Urban Strategies Council. (2007). *Violent Crime in Richmond: An Analysis of Violent Crime in Richmond, California from January 1, 2005 to December 31, 2006*. <https://www.ci.richmond.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/2086/Violent-Crime-Report-Final-3-29-07?bidId=>

² Pearl, B. (2020). *Beyond Policing: Investing in Offices of Neighborhood Safety*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/12/ONSblueprint-121620.pdf>

³ Cure Violence. (2019). *The 5 Required Components of Cure Violence*. <https://cvg.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019.12.12-Cure-Violence-Criteria.pdf>

ONS STAFFING AND SERVICES

STAFFING

The core of ONS staffing is its Neighborhood Change Agents (NCAs). These outreach workers cultivate deep community knowledge, build trusting relationships with young people most at risk of engaging in gun violence, and offer customized outreach services. By maintaining a consistent community presence, NCAs mediate conflict, interrupt violence, and identify and recruit individuals to participate in ONS services.

NCAs reflect the community they serve and frequently have similar lived experiences as the youth and young adults they work with. This approach has emerged as a best practice in the violence reduction field.⁴ Most NCAs grew up in Richmond and have previous justice-system involvement. This shared experience helps to build credibility with ONS's intended audience.

Notably, since its inception, ONS has experienced low turnover among staff who direct and conduct outreach and programming, with an average staff tenure of 11 years. This has made a positive impact on ONS's efforts.

ONS staff are skilled at meeting young people where they are, and they are trained in trauma-informed care. Staff intentionally focus on



relationship-building with youth and subtly add elements of structured programming, such as life skills instruction, as trust and positive connections grow. NCAs regularly participate in training to enhance their knowledge and skills in areas such as community engagement, trauma response, youth development, and culturally responsive service provision.

Notably, since its inception, ONS has experienced low turnover among staff who direct and conduct outreach and programming, with an average staff tenure of 11 years. This has made a positive impact on ONS's efforts. The longevity of staff remaining with ONS contrasts with research indicating that the retention rate for an outreach worker is

⁴ Hureau, D. M., Wilson, T., Jackl, H. M., Arthur, J., Patterson, C., & Papachristos, A. V. (2022). Exposure to gun violence among the population of Chicago community violence interventionists. *Science Advances*, 8(51). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abq7027>.

⁵ Wolf, A. M. & Gutierrez, L. (2011). *Operating and managing street outreach services*. National Council on Crime and Delinquency & National League of Cities. https://evidentchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/publication_pdf_bulletin_22.pdf

typically two to three years; this turnover may be partly due to the stressful nature of this work and associated exposure to trauma and violence.⁵ A likely contributor to ONS's relatively stable staffing is its commitment to supporting NCAs' well-being, which includes connecting staff with a life coach, offering counseling, providing retreats, and having other staff-centered wellness strategies available.

SERVICES

Using a multidisciplinary and collaborative approach, ONS provides two primary interventions—street outreach (community-level intervention) and the Operation Peacemaker Fellowship (individual-level intervention)—to engage young people who ONS believes are highly likely to be involved in gun violence. ONS's intended audience often does not participate in traditional community-based services due to factors such as isolation, lack of trust, and lack of appropriate services and staffing.

STREET OUTREACH: NCAs implement a street-based intervention model that prioritizes building trusting relationships with community members. These efforts allow ONS to consistently gather, assess, and act on critical information about the potential for community violence. Through street outreach activities, NCAs focus on mediating conflict, providing guidance about healthy lifestyle choices, connecting individuals to services, supporting community members after a shooting occurs, and identifying and interrupting possible retaliation efforts.

OPERATION PEACEMAKER FELLOWSHIP: The Fellowship is an 18-month mentoring intervention for young people identified as most likely to be involved in gun violence in Richmond.

Initially implemented in 2010, the Fellowship, like the ONS itself, is not associated with law enforcement agencies or requirements, such as conditions of probation or parole. Participation is voluntary, and young people are invited to join after their initial engagement with NCAs. Fellows receive services that are more intensive compared with street outreach efforts.

Using a cohort approach, the Fellowship consists of multiple interconnected components intended to provide tools, skills, and resources for fellows to lead healthy, productive lives. Understanding that fellows may feel vulnerable interacting together—particularly among participants who had conflicts or were at odds with each other—ONS staff provide programming in individual and small-group settings to facilitate fellows' feelings of safety.

Using a cohort approach, the Fellowship consists of multiple interconnected components intended to provide tools, skills, and resources for fellows to lead healthy, productive lives.

Fellowship components include daily engagement with NCAs; individualized goal development plans (called LifeMAPs); case management, referrals, and support navigating social services; life skills training; intergenerational mentoring through the Elders Circle framework; transformative travel, which focuses on building prosocial relationships among fellows; internship opportunities; and stipends based on completing specific goals.

The Fellowship is a participant-centered intervention. To initially design the Fellowship, ONS partnered with young men who were most

at risk, and the Fellowship model continues to evolve with input from fellows and staff. Each Fellowship is co-designed with the fellows who are engaged in that particular cohort. For example, fellows share what they would like to learn more about during the Fellowship in addition to the areas usually covered; suggestions have included investing, financial literacy, and preparing for driver licensing tests. Fellows also help inform staff about who needs to participate in the Fellowship, both from their own community and what they consider to be rival communities. Moreover, through creation of their LifeMAPs, fellows take

the lead in identifying and making progress on their personal goals.

Each Fellowship is co-designed with the fellows who are engaged in that particular cohort. Fellows share what they would like to learn more about during the Fellowship and help inform staff about who needs to participate in the Fellowship.



ONS RESULTS AND IMPACTS

In the landscape of community safety, Richmond looks vastly different today compared with when ONS was created more than 15 years ago. Homicides have dropped, from 47 in 2007 (the year ONS was launched) to 18 in 2022, a 62% decline. Also, firearm assaults have reached a historic low, falling from 242 in 2007 to 51 in 2022, a 79% decrease.⁶

From 2018 through 2022, Richmond experienced an average of 18 homicides per year.⁷ This number is on pace to fall even further in 2023; through July, there have been just six homicides for the year, three of which are gun-related homicides.⁸ Also, from November 2016 to July 2023, there have been only two gun-related homicides of individuals under age 18. Together, these statistics strongly contrast with the circumstances that ONS faced at its inception.

STREET OUTREACH OUTCOMES

In 2022, NCAs provided 1,359 street outreach engagements, totaling 1,505 hours. NCAs also mediated 63 community conflicts, encompassing 155 hours; of these mediations, the most frequent (38%) were in response to shooting incidents and included efforts to prevent potential retaliation.⁹

FELLOWSHIP OUTCOMES

To assess the Fellowship's progress, ONS developed three core measures of success related to its primary goal of reducing gun violence and associated homicides. ONS annually reports on the number of fellows who (1) are alive; (2) were not arrested on a new firearm-related charge; and (3) do not have new gunshot-related injuries.

VOICES OF ONS STAFF

"We're constantly getting in between situations where we think there is going to be gun violence."

"This is what NCAs do every day—acknowledge young people's pain, allow them to be seen and heard. This is part of engaging young people. Every day, NCAs get someone who doesn't care about themselves to get to a place where they feel like, 'I care and I matter.'"

Source: ONS staff¹⁰

⁶ City of Richmond, Office of Neighborhood Safety. (2013). *2012 Annual Report*; Crime-Stat Report, Richmond Police Department. (January 2023).

⁷ *Chat With the Chief: Crime Statistic Reporting, What's New?* (January 25, 2023). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8-lpRVozIw>

⁸ City of Richmond 2023 Crime Statistics (through July 2023). <https://www.ci.richmond.ca.us/4010/Crime-Statistics-Reports>.

⁹ UC Berkeley, Center for Global Healthy Cities. (2023). *City of Richmond, California, Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS) 2022 Data Report*.

¹⁰ National Council on Crime and Delinquency. (2020). *California Violence Intervention and Prevention (CalVIP) Program Final Local Evaluation Report, City of Richmond Office of Neighborhood Safety*. https://www.bscc.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/City-of-Richmond-ONS_CalVIP-Final-Local-Evaluation-Report-2018-20.pdf

Since the Fellowship began in 2010, 150 young people have participated in it. Of them, nearly all (95%) are still alive. Most fellows (80%) have not been arrested on a new firearm-related charge and do not have new injuries due to gun violence (77%).¹¹

Of the 28 fellows who actively participated in the Fellowship in 2022, almost all (96%) are alive,

96% had no new gunshot-related injuries, and 82% were not arrested on a new firearm-related charge. This cohort of fellows participated in intensive, customized services that included life coaching (82% of fellows), cognitive behavioral therapy (79%), and internships (57%).¹²

VOICES OF FELLOWS

“I’ve seen the path I was on. [ONS] pulled me from a lot of things. They saved my life. They are committed to me even when I am not. To think about how I was . . . almost brings a tear to my eye. Now I have a better relationship with family.”

“What I love about the Fellowship is that it can help anybody help themselves. It is there for individuals who want to open their eyes. It is a family that cares about each other and the community.”

“[ONS staff] are like father figures, every single one of them. It means a lot. . . . I like being around them. [They’re] like family.”

“The Neighborhood Change Agents have played a big role in my journey by giving me pep talks about their history, of the struggles they had to overcome as men and women. They pointed me to a bunch of resources I needed. . . . Moreover, the Neighborhood Change Agents really worked with me and rode my back until I picked up my slack.”

Sources: Process evaluation for ONS (quotes 1–2),¹³ Final evaluation report: Beloved Community, West Contra Costa Partnership for Youth (quote 3),¹⁴ 2012 Annual Report (quote 4).¹⁵

¹¹ Data provided by ONS staff, as of June 2023.

¹² UC Berkeley, Center for Global Healthy Cities. (2023). *City of Richmond, California, Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS) 2022 Data Report*.

¹³ Wolf, A. M., Del Prado Lippman, A., Glesmann, C., & Castro, E. (2015). *Process evaluation for the Office of Neighborhood Safety*. National Council on Crime and Delinquency. https://www.evidentchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/publication_pdf_ons-process-evaluation.pdf

¹⁴ National Council on Crime and Delinquency. (2018). *Final evaluation report: Beloved Community, West Contra Costa Partnership for Youth*. <https://www.bscc.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/Richmond-REDACTED.pdf>

¹⁵ City of Richmond, Office of Neighborhood Safety. (2013). *2012 Annual Report*. <https://www.ci.richmond.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/26434/2012-ONS-Annual-Report?bidId=>

WHAT'S NEXT FOR ONS

The information in this report provides evidence of ONS's vital role in reducing gun violence in Richmond and positively impacting young people. Additional factors, including other violence reduction interventions and strategies implemented concurrently in the city, also may have contributed to these positive shifts.

Achievement of lower levels of gun violence does not signal an end to these efforts; instead, this indicates the need to sustain approaches that contribute to reducing firearm assaults and homicides.

These findings also highlight the importance of continued investment in innovative community-based strategies to intervene with youth and young adults who are most likely to engage in gun violence or to prevent possible engagement before it starts. Achievement of lower levels of gun violence does not signal an end to these efforts; instead, this indicates the need to sustain approaches that contribute to reducing firearm assaults and homicides. These approaches include stopping potential retaliatory gun violence, which, in turn, saves thousands of dollars estimated to be directly associated with non-fatal injury shootings and gun-related homicides.¹⁶

Sustained investment allows ONS to respond appropriately and nimbly to changing trends in

the city while remaining dedicated to its original goal of reducing and eliminating gun violence. Since ONS launched in 2007, the needs of youth and young adults served by ONS have remained relatively stable. Staff report that supporting young people with developing consistent, healthy, prosocial connections and building coping skills remains an urgent need.

At the same time, staff also report an expansion where ONS focuses its efforts. For example, while the Fellowship initially focused on intervening with older youth, younger youth also emerged as a priority several years ago. Moreover, while historically most shootings in Richmond involved Black/African American males, these trends are shifting. Recent city data, as well as reports from NCAs, suggest a need to direct intervention and prevention resources toward more populations, including Latinx/Hispanic individuals, people who are unhoused, and female-identified individuals. ONS is now collaborating with its community partners to identify needs and provide services for these groups.

Sustained investment allows ONS to respond appropriately and nimbly to changing trends in the city while remaining dedicated to its original goal of reducing and eliminating gun violence.

¹⁶ National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform. (2023). *The national cost of gun violence: The price tag for taxpayers*. https://nicjr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NationalCoVReport_022723.pdf



ABOUT THIS REPORT

Evident Change, a nonprofit research organization with an office in Oakland, has partnered with ONS for more than 10 years to support its efforts in developing and implementing innovative programs to reduce gun violence. This partnership includes being the local evaluation partner for ONS's California Violence Intervention and Prevention (CalVIP) program, a statewide grant program administered by the California State of Board and Community Corrections, since 2018; and for CalVIP's predecessor, the California Gang Reduction, Intervention, and Prevention (CalGRIP) grant program. Evident Change also evaluated ONS's Youth Reinvestment Grant initiative, which operated from 2019 to 2023, and

conducted a process evaluation of ONS and its Peacemaker Fellowship. The information and data presented in this publication come from Evident Change's publications, ONS reports, and other sources.

This publication draws on implementation framework theory, which focuses on drivers of effective program implementation such as (1) competency drivers, including recruiting, hiring, training, and supporting staff who implement the program; and (2) organization drivers, including using data-driven decision making to inform implementation, encouraging innovation by staff, and collaborating with partners to secure needed resources to support and sustain the program.¹⁷

¹⁷ National Implementation Research Network (n.d.). *Handout 12: Implementation drivers*. <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/Handout%2012%20Implementation%20Drivers%20Overview.pdf>