

Love Thy Neighbor: A Human(e) Approach to Gun Violence



In Richmond, Calif., the Office of Neighborhood Safety accomplished in only eight years what no traditional law enforcement measures could: a 76 percent decrease in firearm homicides since the program's 2007 implementation. The city—[once considered](#) one of the deadliest in America—yielded its lowest levels of gun violence in 40 years in 2015. While the program tends to receive notoriety for one of its practices in particular, paying offenders to stop committing crimes, the ONS also deserves recognition for its status as a pioneer in treating gun violence as a public health problem and using a community-based approach to prevention.

The ONS seeks to treat both the causes and symptoms of Richmond's deadly environment. The program's officers—Neighborhood Change Agents—establish mentoring relationships with the young men considered Richmond's most frequent perpetrators of gun violence. This is done in order to provide an alternative to the pressures of gang culture. The essence of the program's message to its fellows is, as

Neighborhood Change Agent Sam Vaughn explained to the HPR, "You did something wrong, but we recognize it's not your fault. We recognize that systems across the board have failed you, and we're going to apologize for that and then partner with you to try to fix yourself." Sustained by private donations from community organizations, the office supplements its mentoring with educational, travel, and financial opportunities. The ONS's startling results over a short period of time demonstrate the merits of its approach. Vaughn sums up the program best: "Young people die at an alarming rate, and people don't give a damn. So we decided to give a damn."

Inside the Operation

Media coverage of the ONS tends to focus on the controversial financial support it offers violent offenders and ignore its insights into the root causes of gun violence. In an interview with the HPR, Devone Boggan, the program's founder, decried portrayals of his work as at odds with law enforcement. Instead, he sees the program as a necessary counterpart to the Richmond Police Department. At its core, the ONS focuses on positively engaging those whom Boggan describes as "the most lethal, active firearm offenders in the community," predominantly young men, by offering them a fellowship. The ONS identifies candidates through analysis of Richmond police reports and other data, then reaches out to potential fellows. The program includes everything from pathways to driver's licenses and GEDs to its notorious monetary payments, which can range from \$300 to \$1000 monthly for a finite period, with the amount depending on the fellow's progress within the program.

However, mentorship and travel constitute the most powerful opportunities the ONS offers its fellows. The program's Neighborhood Change Agents, often former felons themselves, serve as mentors and exemplify the possibility of rehabilitation. For formerly neglected and isolated individuals, these relationships reveal a welcome alternative to the punitive measures of law enforcement. Boggan explains, "For the first time in these young men's lives, they have city government seeking them—not with a badge, not with a gun—but seeking them, saying, 'We need your help, we need your partnership, and we want to help you.'" Neighborhood Change Agents engage with each fellow multiple times daily to communicate their dedication to his individual situation. Later into the fellowship, fellows have the opportunity to travel outside of Richmond, allowing them to participate in community service, meet mayors and lawmakers, and visit other countries, all experiences they could not find in Richmond. Moreover, Boggan has a particular strategy for doling out

travel opportunities to his fellows: He personally takes pairs of young men who consider each other enemies in the context of Richmond outside the city in the hope that they will resolve their differences. While seemingly risky, this practice returns results. Boggan finds that “it’s hard to be in South Africa, on Robben Island, in Mandela’s prison cell, with your enemy from Richmond and that not have a life-changing impact.” So far, his trips have garnered popularity and reduced enmity among the fellows.

A variety of community issues play into the cycle of violence that produces firearm offenders. Parents and teachers often don’t have the time or resources to provide the support that young people need. Neighborhood Change Agent Sam Vaughn told the HPR, “There are millions of young people where the first violent act that they’ve ever seen or perpetrated was promoted by their parents—not because their parents don’t love them but because their parents live in a war zone.” Likewise, teachers in under-resourced schools like those in Richmond cannot offer the full amount of support their students need. Speaking from experience, Vaughn finds that with regard to troubled students, often, “a teacher can’t even teach. All a teacher can do is discipline.” Thus, the Neighborhood Change Agents of the ONS comprise a significant support system for its fellows.

Beyond Richmond

Other U.S. cities stricken by gun violence have attempted similar programs but none with effects as notable as Richmond’s. In 1995, the Harvard Kennedy School pioneered the Boston Gun Project, using a data-driven approach and emphasizing community outreach to achieve significant reductions in crime. More recently, the Cure Violence project, which originated in Chicago in 2007—the same year as the ONS—employed a similar holistic approach to rehabilitating offenders. Cure Violence currently partners with Richmond and a number of other cities domestically and abroad to use “disease control and behavior change methods” to combat gun violence, according to its [website](#). Its numerous success stories provide corroborating evidence for the merits of the ONS’s approach.

Earlier this year, Boggan began working with the consulting firm Advance Peace to bring the ideas of the ONS to other cities, starting with Oakland, Calif., a city just south of Richmond [known](#) for its pervasive violence and corrupt police force. The ONS also regularly sends representatives to various other U.S. cities to share insights about its practices. International recognition of the program spans North America; in 2013, the ONS visited the city government in Mexico City. Canada’s national public radio station recently

produced a [special](#) on the program's potential for combatting violence in Toronto.

In Washington, D.C., Councilmember Kenyan R. McDuffie pioneered the Neighborhood Engagement Achieves Results Amendment Act of 2016 to create a program in the image of the ONS and its approach to gun violence. While Richmond relies on private grants for [most](#) of its costs, the NEAR Act calls for public funding, creating even higher stakes for the D.C. program. However, higher community accountability due to taxpayer investment should only strengthen the program.

Boggan emphasized to the HPR that future iterations of the ONS in other cities must tailor their programs to local factors rather than use a "cookie cutter approach." He explained, "When we were putting this effort together, it was solely about the city of Richmond, and it considered and took into account the history of gun violence in the city of Richmond, the personalities involved, the communities historically impacted by that violence, and the current state of affairs in that city when we developed the effort." The new implementations of such programs in cities like Oakland and Washington, D.C. will test the transferability of the ONS's tenets to other locales. While the ONS focused on Richmond specifically, the problems that plagued the city aren't uncommon today; over the course of last year, the CDC [recorded](#) almost 11,000 firearm homicides nationally.

The success of a gun violence prevention program that hinges on community investment and engagement points to a fundamental misunderstanding at the heart of our nation's criminal justice system, which typically ignores those approaches. The ONS introduced the idea of building personal relationships to reimagine and restructure an entire city, taking an approach tailored to Richmond. The program relies upon a key component that many urban law enforcement agencies lack: the trust of its community. And while the fellows of the ONS comprise its focus, all of Richmond enjoys the program's effects. In 2016, the residents of Richmond encounter quieter, safer streets than they did just a few years earlier. The [results](#) of community surveys conducted by the city in 2007, the founding year of the ONS, and in 2015 found an 80 percent increase in reported quality of life. Over the same period, satisfaction with Richmond as a place to live and raise children more than doubled. While the ONS is by no means solely responsible for these changes, the program is one of the most significant variables in the evolution of Richmond over recent years. The model of an engaging, rehabilitative approach that draws its officers and funding from within the community it serves has proven its efficacy.

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