



‘This is not luck. This is a systemic approach’: These major US cities are trying to curb violent crime — and it’s working

By [Dakin Andone](#) and [Emma Tucker](#), CNN

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Brooklyn Homes residents have seen more Baltimore City police patrols in the neighborhood since a mass shooting in July 2023, they say. Kenneth K. Lam/Baltimore Sun/Tribune News Service/Getty

Baltimore (CNN) — Before he was the mayor, Brandon Scott was a regular at a barbershop here just steps from an intersection long notorious for illegal drugs.

For decades, the small business – on Frederick Avenue in the city’s southwest Irvington area – gave neighbors a shelter from gangs and dealers, somewhere they could gather safely and talk about music, family and friends.

That “barbershop was the only place they felt like they could come and talk to real people and not feel some sense of someone being ready to shoot or rob them,” Scott told CNN.

In recent months, though, the refuge zone has expanded.

The mayor’s office – through its revived Group Violence Reduction Strategy effort – in March led a takedown of the alleged drug trafficking organization that long had plagued the neighborhood and driven violence citywide, with 12 people indicted on drug and gun charges, Scott said at the time.

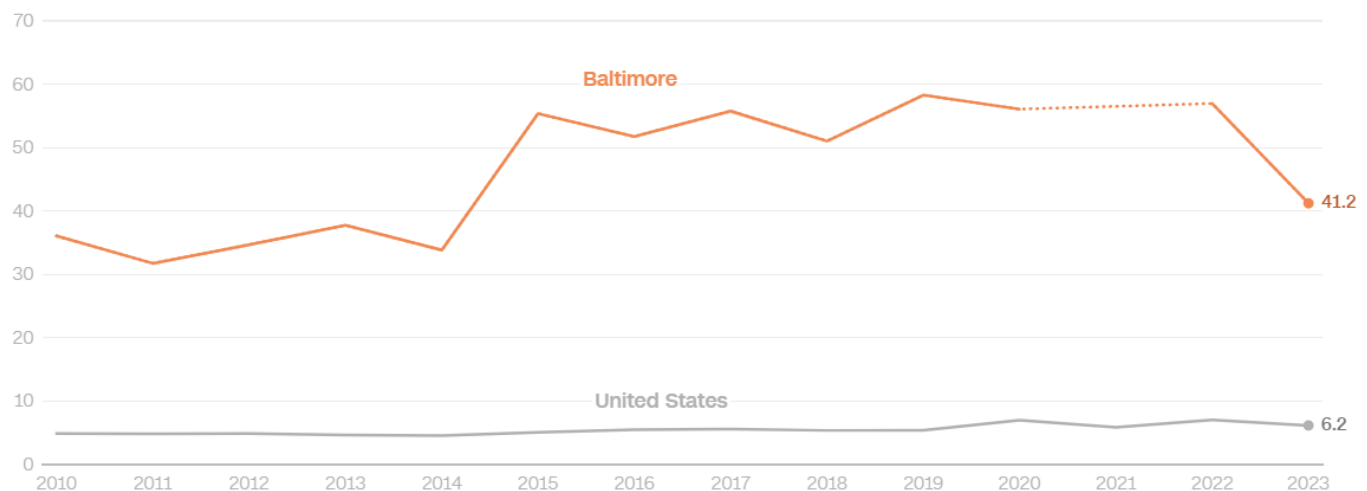
The Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement had helped “answer ... the community’s call” by investigating the alleged crime ring, Scott said. The mayor then issued a warning to anyone unwilling to accept that same office’s inverse, perhaps more important mission: to help deter violence in the first place.

“Take us up on our opportunities to change your life,” he said, “or end up ... indicted, headed to prisons.”

By some key measures, the mission is succeeding.

The homicide rate in Baltimore is the lowest since 2014

Homicides per 100,000 residents



Note: The Baltimore Police Department changed crime reporting systems in 2021. Data is not comparable for that year.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

Graphic: Annette Choi, CNN

Aimed at curbing shootings through an “intentional collaboration between law enforcement, social services, and community members,” the violence reduction strategy last year helped drive Baltimore’s record 21% annual decline in homicides, Scott said, with an even steeper 34% drop this year through July 8, police department data show.

With similar trends emerging across the country, officials in Baltimore – as well as in cities including Detroit and San Antonio – are crediting their own recent investments in crime-fighting strategies that, beyond traditional arrest-and-prosecution, include social services, intervention by trusted community members and backing in part by federal funds from the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act.

Across the country, the rate of violent crime dropped 3% overall between 2022 and 2023, according to FBI data released this month that also showed a nearly 12% decrease in murder and non-negligent manslaughter – the largest decline in decades. The data highlights a key political issue ahead of the 2024 election, as Republicans and Democrats each seek to portray themselves as tough on crime.

While crime trends are complex, with a variety of social and economic factors contributing to any notable change and attacks with many victims prone to skew public perception, Baltimore officials tout the Group Violence Reduction Strategy as key to the city’s fight against violent crime – in particular its push for community buy-in.

“We’re dealing with government having really low levels of trust within the community,” said Stefanie Mavronis, director of the neighborhood safety office, as she pointed to lessons learned from Freddie Gray’s 2015 death in police custody and the protests it spurred

“We are not often a credible partner, and coming out of the uprising there was a lot of community energy around the idea that community has to be a part of the solution and needs to be a co-owner of our strategies moving forward.”

Scott in 2022 recast a previous city program as the Group Violence Reduction Strategy, with a “focused deterrence” pilot in the city’s Western District, beset for nearly a decade by high murder and shooting rates.



Members of Roca, a referral partner in the Group Violence Reduction Strategy, gather for a morning meeting at the organization's Baltimore site. Emma Tucker/CNN

Law enforcement, social services providers and community members work together to identify people at the highest risk of being victims or perpetrators of gun violence, then give them stipends for substance abuse or job placement counseling. The strategy costs about \$7.3 million annually, paid for through the city's general budget and other federal, state and philanthropic sources, the mayor's office told CNN.

The goal is to disrupt underlying issues that lead to violence, like in the zone around the barbershop, which Malik Blandon bought from Scott's cousin in 2018.

Since the city backed takedown of the alleged drug ring, the area has become more peaceful and quieter," Blandon told CNN. Still, though, the new owner offered a word of caution echoed by others in US cities who've seen crime – and public programs aimed at staunching it – spark, then fade:

Gun violence has not "came and gone," he said. "No matter how many times they come and clean one crew up, there's another one coming."

Police plus 'community' in Detroit

A community-centered anti-violence strategy also is taking shape in Detroit, where Deputy Todd Bettison often saw how effective community groups could be at deescalating neighborhood tension during his nearly 30 years with the city's police department.

Bettison, who rose to the agency's second-in-command before becoming the mayor's deputy, often called on these groups to calm Detroit neighborhoods, complementing the work of law enforcement, he told CNN.

But the organizations, he said, operated on a "shoestring budget" – and he couldn't give them so much as a gas card to help fund their work because of city procurement rules and its priorities at the time.

That changed with the American Rescue Plan Act, which Detroit in 2023 started using to fund the violence intervention program ShotStoppers. Select community groups get \$700,000 a year to enact their own strategies to reduce homicides and shootings in a 3.5- to 4.5-square-mile swath of the city, with up to \$700,000 more in bonuses available to each annually.

So far, the most successful of the six initial groups is FORCE Detroit, which serves the far west side. Its sweeping approach emphasizes meeting residents' basic physical and psychological needs through access to housing, food, employment or financial security, among other goals.



Dajuan "Zoe" Kennedy, a community organizer with FORCE Detroit, discusses violence prevention and other life lessons with his mentees in 2022 at The Block in Detroit's Cass Park. Sarahbeth Maney/Detroit Free Press/Imagn Images

Each aims to further the spearhead of its work: community violence intervention. For that, the group relies on known “credible messengers” to intercede when ordinary tensions threaten to erupt in gunfire. Many messengers once were perpetrators of gun violence or victims of it – oftentimes both, said Dajuan “Zoe” Kennedy, FORCE Detroit’s executive deputy director of programs, who fits that very mold.

Kennedy joined a gang at a young age, he said, a path that eventually led to the killing of a friend. He was charged with second-degree murder and pleaded guilty to manslaughter, he said. Within weeks of leaving prison, Kennedy met FORCE Detroit’s founder and executive director, Alia Harvey-Quinn, and they became good friends. Now, they organize together.

Kennedy’s commitment to transformation is a key trait of credible messengers, who are expected to have numerous contacts each week – through social media, phone calls, text messages and in-person visits – with those at risk of perpetrating violence. The contacts can serve a variety of purposes, be it defusing conflicts that arise on social media, gathering information or encouraging participants away from violence.

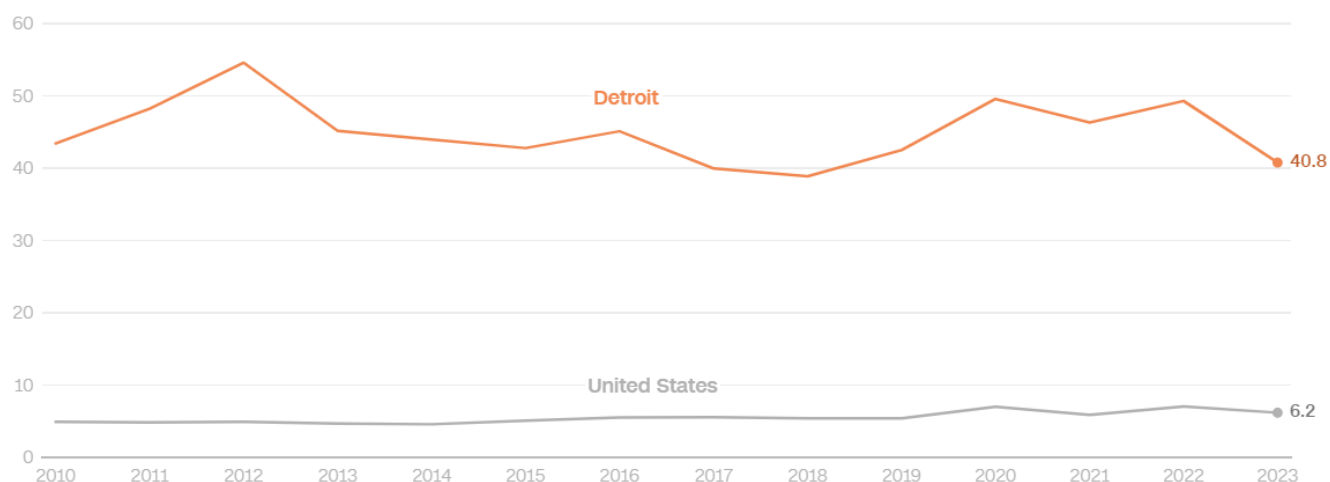
The end goal, said Harvey-Quinn, is to build relationships FORCE Detroit can leverage for violence intervention when needed.

And it’s working: FORCE Detroit saw a 72% drop in homicides and non-fatal shootings in its zone from November to January compared with the same period a year prior; from February through April, it notched a 67% change, city statistics show.

The results also beat stats in other ShotStoppers zones and far exceeded gains in parts of the city not overseen by any ShotStoppers group, earning FORCE Detroit performance bonuses of \$175,000 in each of the two quarters, according to the city.

Detroit recorded a drop-off in its homicide rate last year

Homicides per 100,000 residents



“I think people have been surprised,” Harvey-Quinn said of residents’ reaction to FORCE Detroit’s program. “Surprised around the authenticity and the depth, surprised that people care about these issues and are willing to show up.

“And then that unlocks a set of honor codes that are within our community that people just have abandoned, oftentimes because they feel like no one cares,” she said. “Once they feel like people care, they show up and protect the work and the organization.”

Police also recognize the value. Assistant Chief of Police Charles Fitzgerald called the community violence intervention effort “an amazing layer” law enforcement can rely on to help bring down violent crime.

“It’s been a very valuable tool,” he told CNN, “and we hope it continues.”

For now, it will. The mayor’s office in June announced FORCE Detroit was one of four groups whose ShotStoppers’ contracts would continue another year as the city also hopes to expand the program.

A 3-step plan unfolds in San Antonio

Other major US cities have taken a different tack than Baltimore and Detroit.

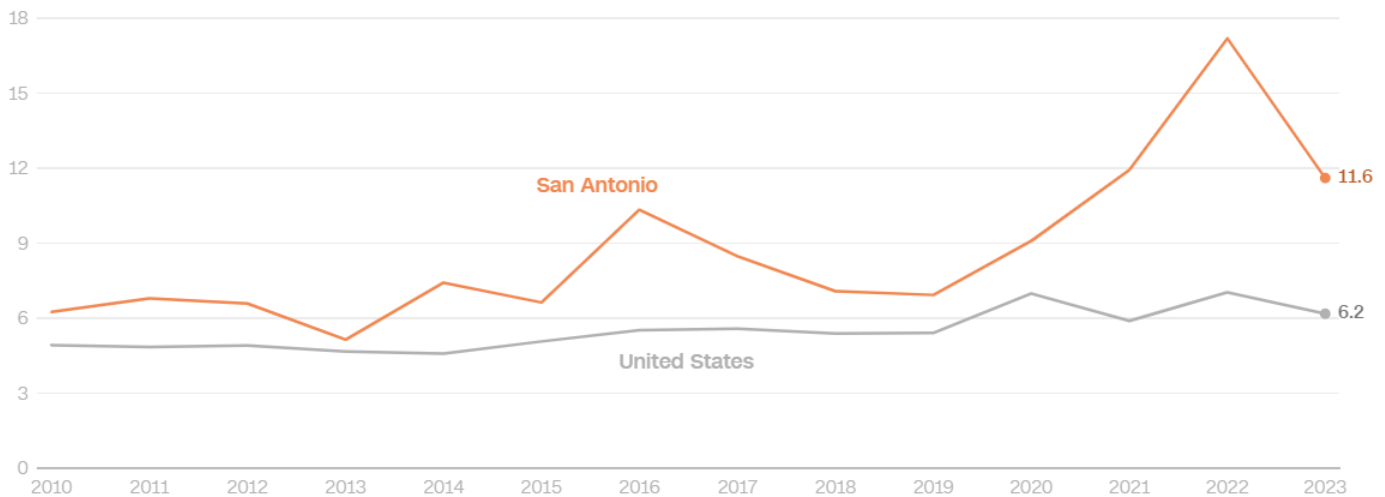
San Antonio instead is leaning into a three-phase Violent Crime Reduction Plan developed by criminologists at the University of Texas at San Antonio and also deployed in Dallas, Salt Lake City and Tacoma, Washington.

The strategies are decades old, but they’ve never been employed together in quite this way, UTSA criminologist and Professor Michael Smith said, explaining: “We wanted to cherry-pick the best ... and package them together in a single strategic plan.”

So far, only the first phase is complete in San Antonio: a “hotspot policing” effort that raises police visibility in parts of the city linked to crime, Smith said. Phase two, now in its infancy, and phase three will address underlying conditions that contribute to crime, he added.

San Antonio's homicide rate fell in 2023 after years of incline

Homicides per 100,000 residents



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

Graphic: Annette Choi, CNN

For phase one, officials mapped San Antonio to a 300-meter-by-300-meter grid, then analyzed which of its 133,000 cells see the most violent crime and when, Smith told CNN. Officers in patrol cars with lights flashing then are posted in those places for 15 minutes at peak times. Every 60 days, the grids are reevaluated and police resources shifted to cover the toughest 35 or so cells, Smith said.

The result was a 37% decrease in violent crime last year in high crime areas compared with the year prior, an improvement UTSA criminologists and the city's police department are confident contributed to an overall 7.3% reduction in violent crime in the city in 2023, the UTSA report said.

“When this plan first rolled out, not a whole lot of people were happy with it because it just seemed too simplistic and – again, quite candidly – kind of boring,” San Antonio Police Chief William McManus told the city's Public Safety Committee in April, CNN affiliate KSAT reported. “But the fact of the matter is, it's working, and I think everybody has gotten used to it by now.”



Police Chief William McManus listens to questions during a September 17 meeting of the City Council's Public Safety Committee at City Hall in San Antonio. Josie Norris/San Antonio Express-News/Getty Images

But the program has not been universally popular.

District 2 City Councilperson Jalen McKee-Rodriguez was “frustrated” by the Violent Crime Reduction Plan’s first phase, believing it was a “surface level” strategy that did nothing to address the root causes of crime like poverty and lack of access to transportation, housing and health care, he said.

Its gains also are not necessarily felt by residents: Property crime remains up, McKee-Rodriguez said. And while homicides are down, the statistics don’t track gunshots that don’t hit a person or property – but still echo through neighborhoods.

“It makes it harder for members of my community to accept that crime is down when their fear, their fear for their safety, is still very much alive,” he said. “I don’t know that numbers mean much when your reality feels like something different.”

The councilperson is looking forward, he said, to phase two, which the overall plan calls “problem-oriented, place-based policing.”

It again focuses on places known to be “persistently violent,” Smith said, then calls on stakeholder agencies – law enforcement, the fire department, parks and recreation and others look at historical data to determine why those places likely generate crime.

Agencies then home in on solutions: from environmental – think trash, abandoned cars, a dearth of streetlighting – to a lack of social services, like after-school programming.

With the first two phases based on the idea that crime occurs in a relatively small number of places, the third phase – focused deterrence – banks on the notion that relatively few people are responsible for a disproportionate share of a community’s violent crime, Smith said.

The concept, dating to the mid-1990s, calls for those people to be identified and summoned to meet with officials from the police department, the prosecutor’s office and social service agencies, who urge them to change their ways and offer resources before caseworkers follow up, similar in spirit to the strategies underway now in Detroit and Baltimore.

While McKee-Rodriguez, the council member, is more optimistic about the latter phases’ ability to address root issues of crime, he emphasized San Antonio already has an array of tools, agencies and strategies aimed at reducing violence, including a credible messenger model called Stand Up SA.

“Expanding that program would be one of the biggest investments we can make as a city,” he said. “It’s already done great work in building trust in populations that inherently or usually would not trust a government or city official or a police officer.”

‘Safety and homicides are 2 different spectrums’

In Baltimore, the latest reimagining of public safety already has a higher level of buy-in than prior efforts, given its intensive life coaching, emergency housing and employment aid and stipend opportunities, said Scott, who formerly served as president of the City Council.

This time, Baltimore also is addressing “crippling poverty, decades – if not more – of systemic racism and a lack of strong leadership,” said Kurt Palermo, the Baltimore-based executive vice president for Maryland of Roca, a referral partner in the Group Violence Reduction Strategy that looks to break cycles of violence and stop violent behavior driven by trauma.

“For the first time in a long time, we’re in a position to even lower last year’s reduction in homicides two years in a row,” Palermo told CNN. “This is not a fluke; this is not luck. This is a systemic approach to a public health crisis.”



Calvin Monroe, a Roca Baltimore youth worker, carries cognitive behavioral therapy training materials on a lanyard around his neck. Kim Hairston/The Baltimore Sun/Tribune News Service/Getty Images

The investment now in community groups in Detroit also reflects a “different way of thinking,” Bettison, the deputy mayor, said, including “putting a system in place so we can measure their work above the citywide trends so law enforcement can really respect the work that they do as well.

“Now, we can really appreciate their true value,” he said.

Others, though, are skeptical. Some Baltimore residents told CNN the city’s declining homicide rate has no impact on whether they feel safer in neighborhoods beleaguered for decades by gun violence.

“Safety and homicides are two different spectrums,” said Ray Kelly, a lifelong resident and community advocate in West Baltimore. “We will never feel safe because we always had to rely on our own experience.

“We make ourselves safe,” he added. “Maybe in 15 years, these kids might feel a little safer.”

CNN’s Emma Tucker reported from Baltimore, while Dakin Andone reported from New York.