

# GENERATION ★ PROGRESS



## Fighting for Our Future

A Series of Case Studies on Young People Leading Local Efforts on  
Gun Violence Prevention and Criminal Justice Reform

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# Introduction

Across the country, young people are leading initiatives to reform the criminal justice system, and stop the gun violence epidemic. To learn about some of these efforts, Generation Progress visited six cities where young people have successfully moved forward these dual priorities. For the purposes of this report, young people refers to those aged 18 to 35 years old. Young people are most impacted by gun violence. According to [America's Youth Under Fire](#), a 2018 joint report by Generation Progress and the Center for American Progress, gunfire has surpassed car accidents as a leading killer of young people in the United States. Young people understand that if we are to end the gun violence epidemic, we must place it in context with the criminal justice system and policing.

# Baltimore, MD

By: Amber Gaither and Giovanni Rocco

Through our [#Fight4AFuture](#) Gun Violence Prevention and Criminal Justice Reform Network members, we learned of various ways that young leaders in Baltimore, Maryland are implementing programs to provide young people with the tools and resources necessary to be successful in all aspects of their lives. In a place where mistrust in local law enforcement runs deep, the most effective solutions to combat gun violence must circumvent traditional models and prioritize hyper-localized community leadership experiences above all else. With the support of city funding, youth programs have flourished, giving young people the chance to be leaders in their own right. Through conversations with community organizer Dejuan Patterson, and youth program leaders Van Brooks, Anisha Thomas, and Brittany Young, we learned of the impact that a hands-on approach led by young people can have on neighborhoods and communities.

## A Unique Model

In a city familiar with police brutality, community leadership becomes even more important in combating the cycle of neighborhood gun violence. Realizing this, nonprofits have placed trust in local leadership, valuing the lived experiences of community members and allowing them to address the problems found in their neighborhoods.

Van Brooks, founder and CEO of Safe Alternative Foundation for Education, teaches young people the importance of getting an education through interactive activities such as woodshop classes, beach cleanups, and other outdoor activities. This program provides local youth with opportunities to

volunteer and connects them with job opportunities . Community organizer Dejuan Patterson has taken a similar approach to community investment, partnering up with Baltimore City Hall to implement youth programs focusing on development and entrepreneurship. Squeegee Core was created as a way to shift teenagers from the streets into entrepreneurship by showing young people how to make money doing what they enjoy. The program was started last summer, employing the “squeegee kids” who wash windshields in the streets for tips. Another program with the same entrepreneurship focus is “Teen Biz Challenge,” utilizing friendly competition among young people with a desire to own a business. The challenge is a five-week paid business camp and competition meant to inspire and arm young people with the tools to create their own businesses. After participating in this competition, winners are awarded \$5,000 to grow their businesses. The goal of both of these programs is to create economic opportunities that disrupt poverty and prevent gun violence by addressing one of the root cause of gun violence: community disempowerment.

Safe Streets, a program funded by grants and the Mayor’s Criminal Justice initiative, owes its success to a structure that keeps the needs of young people at the center of their work. The program, going on its tenth year, was the first replication of the [Cure Violence](#) model, now found in various cities across the country. Found in four police posts in the city, and on track to open three more, Safe Streets hires “interrupters” with criminal records, a move that both employs people who would otherwise have a hard time being employed, and places them in areas where young people can have access to professionals who are trained on conflict resolution. Anisha Thomas, a Safe Streets staff member summarized it best, saying “if you’re not part of the community, you don’t know what the community is going through.”



## Improved Communication

The relationship between communities and the agencies that exist to provide services is crucial. In Baltimore, community leaders are taking measures to improve communication between existing government agencies with resources and communities in need.

Brittany Young is the founder and CEO of b360 Baltimore, a program focused on changing the perception of urban dirt bikers and educating young people about STEM. Dirt biking is a sport practiced mostly by young people of color and popular in major American cities like Baltimore. Bikers are often stereotyped and face hostility from law enforcement and local governments. After many meetings with Councilman Pinkett and the police commissioner, Young created a safe space where conversations could be had between riders and officers. Through these discussions, debates, and forums, police and riders were able to come to a conclusion on how both sides could co-exist. After eight months of meetings and deliberations, a mayor's task force was created to find solutions on how the city can grow and work together to provide safe and legal spaces for dirt bikers to ride.

*“Baltimore programming uses economic opportunities and policies to disrupt poverty and prevent gun violence.” – Dejuan Patterson, community activist and entrepreneur*

With disruptors and outreach coordinators spread out through Baltimore, Safe Streets is well-suited to understand the needs and challenges of communities most at risk for gun violence. In addition to working on the ground, Safe Streets has responders stationed at two local hospitals tasked with helping shooting survivors get connected with resources and follow-up visits. This model of advocacy places gun violence prevention in context with other infrastructures to help survivors navigate bureaucratic systems that they might know how to navigate or afford.



## Solutions Through Funding

Despite the hard work of community leaders, these community-based solutions and programs don't succeed on their own. The city has devoted yearly funding specifically catered to youth programs and development. In 2017, \$12 million was set aside to invest in minority-led organizations that, in past years, had been passed over for city funding. Unique to this was the deep involvement of community leaders in the funding process. Teachers, recent graduates, veterans, and African-American residents were among the groups of people involved in helping decide which organizations would receive portions of the \$12 million fund.

## Conclusion

Baltimore's approach to gun violence prevention focuses on the importance of education, community leadership, and youth development. There is a need to equip young people with the tools and resources to succeed on their own and these youth programs are doing just that. When explaining Baltimore's approach to curbing gun violence, Dejuan Patterson summarized what other cities should replicate, "Baltimore programming uses economic opportunities and policies to disrupt poverty and prevent gun violence."

# Columbia, SC

By: Amber Gaither and Giovanni Rocco

Columbia, South Carolina is a model for youth-centered reforms, and why Generation Progress picked it as the first city to visit as part of our series. Columbia that has established two community review boards for law enforcement, and is the first city to ban the use of bump stocks, a firearm accessory that accelerates the rate-of-fire. Engaging young people was essential in the city's criminal justice reform and gun violence prevention initiatives.

Through our #Fight4AFuture Gun Violence Prevention and Criminal Justice Reform network members, we learned of the bold steps that the city and county law enforcement agencies have been taking to create more responsive and transparent police departments. Although culturally and geographically a southern American city, Columbia shocked the country by passing a ban on the use of bump stocks. It's believed that the city is the first, or one of the first, in the country to do so. In early July, Generation Progress visited Columbia, South Carolina to speak with those instrumental in the city's reforms. Through conversations with Chief of Police William Holbrook, Deputy Chief M.J. Kelly, County Sheriff Leon Lott, and youth activist Tracey Tucker, we learned how this city was able to harness the power of young people to develop progressive criminal justice and gun control initiatives.

## Community Review Boards

For years, young people horrified by the police brutality seen in cases across the country have been calling for greater transparency from our nation's law

enforcement. The calls from youth organizers, community leaders, and Black Lives Matter activists, have often gone unheard and police-community relationships have been hurt. In Columbia, the city and county police have incorporated many ideas with input from local youth organizers to create a police force that's more open and accessible to the public. In Columbia young organizers were deeply involved in the establishment of two community review boards, one for the sheriff's department, and one for the city police.

Sheriff Lott's Citizens' Advisory Council is comprised of 26 council members that represent the residents of Richland County. Service on the council is voluntary and members convene approximately four times per year, or as requested by the sheriff. The Council has three main tasks. Their roles include reviewing complaints against Sheriff Department employees, reviewing disciplinary actions, and reviewing internal policies and procedures.

The ten members of the Columbia Police Department's Community Advisory Council represent various stakeholders, the majority of which are appointed by the mayor and city council members. The Council provides oversight and recommendations to city police as well as citizen input in administrative cases.

While the idea of community councils is not new, Columbia has taken it a step further. Sheriff Lott has recently given his Citizens Advisory Council a say in the department's hiring practices, ensuring that police officers hired by the department are vetted by the community members that they will police. This follows Sheriff Lott's overhaul of professional standards and internal affairs unit that installed a discipline command review board. The department implemented body cameras that differ from those cameras found in other departments. While many body cameras require the officer to turn the device on, resulting in human error, the cameras worn by county police officers turn on automatically when a weapon is drawn. Eliminating the need to voluntarily turn on body cameras is a great move that will reduce human

error, but there is room for improvement. There are other interactions that don't involve weapons where body cameras can serve a useful purpose. Departments should consider more comprehensive uses of their body cameras, beyond situations involving deadly force. The city's police department has followed many of Sheriff Lott's reforms, including the creation of its own advisory council. Columbia police and the sheriff's department have also joined in the chorus calling for sensible gun control measures by supporting a ban on bump stocks in the city. While the move is mostly symbolic and is a small step, it shows that police departments have a stake in the fight for gun violence prevention and have a unique voice that can help push the conversation forward.

## Gun Violence Prevention

While gun violence is a problem that disproportionately affects young people, the ramifications and effects of gun-related crimes affect entire communities. "We are on the receiving end, along with the families, of dealing and processing those crime scenes," says Deputy Chief of Police Melron Kelly. Police officers are uniquely positioned to understand the effects of gun violence, not only as first responders and targets of that violence, but also as witnesses to the traumatic impacts that gun violence leaves on communities. Frustrated by the lack of action at the federal level even after a string of mass shootings, Columbia Mayor Steve Benjamin decided to act to curb gun violence in his city. There was just one problem—South Carolina's preemption laws prevented him from regulating firearms or their components. That's when he enlisted his city's police department's staff attorney and police advisor. Together they crafted language that is in line with state law and circumvents the state's preemption restrictions. The ordinance does not outlaw bump stocks, but rather bans their use. While the mayor's move is not a major step in dealing with gun violence, it is an important step that sends a message. "It is symbolic because we are in a state that is gun friendly," says Chief Holbrook. In an area known for their lack of commonsense gun

violence prevention measures the move, along with the police department's support, shows that it is possible for local municipalities to act to protect their citizens and prevent gun violence.

## What's Next

Columbia should serve as a blueprint of how young people's involvement in local politics can turn into meaningful and lasting change. The reforms in the city also show that there's an opportunity for young people to have a bigger voice. Police departments should be explicit in their inclusion of young people in their community boards and be proactive in their outreach to communities that might not feel welcomed in law enforcement spaces. Millennials are the most [diverse](#) generation in American history, with black and Latino youth, two groups that have historically been heavily monitored and overpoliced, making up more than a third of the generation. When dealing with youth of color it is important for police departments to be mindful of these realities and understand the reasons why some young people might be apprehensive to engage.

*Police departments should be explicit in their inclusion of young people in their community boards and be proactive in their outreach to communities that might not feel welcomed in law enforcement spaces.*

Organizations working towards facilitating positive relationships between police and young people and community members must also be supported and funded. While young people were instrumental in the creation of Columbia's community boards, as key parts of the community, they should be fairly and accurately represented. One possible way to bring more young people on board is for the police departments to be deliberate and proactive in their outreach to young people, either directly or through local

organizations. Keeping the needs of young people in mind, law enforcement would be well prepared when reaching out to local youth to include them in their reform efforts.

## Conclusion

Engaging local youth is essential to driving progressive criminal justice reform and gun violence prevention efforts. Columbia, South Carolina is a model for how young people can get involved these reforms at the local level. Sheriff Lott of the Richland County Sheriff's Department and Columbia Chief of Police Holbrook have been instrumental in leading with bold reforms and efforts. As police departments across America look for ways to prevent gun violence and reform criminal justice practices, they can look at Columbia, South Carolina, and the work of local youth organizers, as a model for their own departments. Columbia law enforcement also has an opportunity to give young people a greater voice. Young people today, understandably, often engage with police in adversarial contexts and in confrontational scenarios. This creates an opportunity for police departments to engage with young people in proactive, constructive, and respectful, ways to ensure that the voices of local youth are being heard.

# Louisville, KY

By: Kiara Richardson and Giovanni Rocco

Louisville, Kentucky is home to a broad network of like-missioned organizations, including Peace Education, Pivot to Peace, and No More Red Dots (NMRD). These institutions collaborate to help vulnerable youth establish interpersonal skills, address gun violence as a public health issue, and interrupt retaliatory violence at crime scenes or in hospitals. These initiatives employ youth-led strategies carried out by experienced community leaders that are encouraged to engage young people and build trusting relationships with high impact communities.

One Love Louisville, a project of the Mayor's Office for Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods (OSHN), focuses on high impact areas to reduce violence through youth-based programming. OSHN's initiative disrupts the school to prison pipeline by encouraging civic engagement and intercultural fellowship at an early age.

Through conversations with Peace Education Director Eileen Blanton, Pivot to Peace Project Manager Deborah Barnes-Byers, NMRD Cofounder Dr. Eddie Woods, OSHN Director Rashaad Abdur-Rahman, and their youth specialist Nubia Bennett, we see excellent demonstrations of impactful, community-based methods to confront real issues impacting Louisville.

## Holistic Approach to Gun Violence Prevention, Education, and Training

Louisville's holistic approach to gun violence prevention and intervention



creates a structured path for impacted families and individuals to become leaders in their own communities. The city has adopted the internationally recognized [Cure Violence](#) methodology, which treats violence as a preventable public health concern. Louisville's formula directly acknowledges the need to address the root causes behind an individual's susceptible behavior. Poverty, dramatic incarceration rates, and education disparities, are critical components to the crime problem in this country, and in Louisville. The city has been successful in tackling these subjects along with encouraging restorative justice practices when creating the evidence-based models discussed in this case study.

## Cross-Sector Participation

Nonprofits working in collaboration with city government are successfully empowering young people to lead the gun violence prevention and criminal justice reform movement.

### Nonprofits

**Peace Education** provides young people and adults conflict resolution trainings and workshops at schools and community organizations throughout Louisville.

**Pivot to Peace** provides gunshot and stabbing survivors between the ages of 18 and 34 with programming. These programs address the grief and trauma of affected individuals and their families. Participants receive wraparound services including mental health support and training for conflict resolution.

**No More Red Dots** is a community-based program grounded in trust that works with Pivot to Peace to identify victims of violence and reduce retaliation by engaging with all people

involved. In partnership with Pivot to Peace, they work to discover the root causes of violence and create pathways to peacefully address them.

## City Government

**The Office for Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods** was established in 2013 after a 2012 triple homicide moved Mayor Greg Fischer to convene a group of interdisciplinary leaders to begin developing strategies for reducing violence in the city of Louisville. That convening resulted in the creation and implementation of an action plan aimed at identifying gaps between the needs and resources for community members from birth to adulthood. OSHN employs a holistic methodology by addressing violence as a public health issue, identifying risk factors and providing resources for violence prevention. Referrals to Peace Education, Pivot to Peace and No More Red Dots are made for individuals whose immediate needs extend beyond the office's capacity. OSHN director, Rashaad Abdur-Rahman, explained that addressing challenges in a comprehensive and innovative way allows young people to take the lead. This approach is demonstrated by some of their current projects:

**One Love Louisville** – A youth-centered program that works to disrupt the cycle of crime in impacted communities. Programming places emphasis on education, economic growth, civic engagement, and intersectional collaboration. Program participants also engage in workshops and trainings facilitated by Peace Education. One Love also releases reports that include useful strategies for other areas facing the same hardships.

**The Youth Implementation Team** – A civic engagement program available to Louisville youth between the ages of 13 and 23 that teaches leadership and development skills through first-hand interaction with local government, business, and community and faith leaders. Participants gain valuable skill sets through internships and workshops designed to drive energy toward violence prevention.

**THRIVE Fellowship** – A privately funded civic engagement initiative offered to young men between the ages of 22 and 26 with misdemeanor convictions or previous involvements with the criminal justice system. Through this fellowship, participants follow a 32-hour schedule, Monday to Friday, where they are trained on leadership development, case management, and workforce training. The fellowship provides a stipend to cover daily living expenses including housing, food, and clothing.

Unfortunately, this work is dictated by the effects of a total lack of firearm regulations. Despite good coordination with city government offices able to aid in the aftermath of a shooting, there is virtually nothing being done by the state legislature to enact preventative measures. These community-based organizations are doing their best to pick up the pieces in the aftermath of shootings.

## Existing in a Vacuum

During a period between 2013 and 2014, Louisville saw a major [spike](#) in homicides that continued to trend upward in the following years. Consistent

with that trend, the Major Cities Chiefs Association released a 2017 [report](#) that ranked Louisville 11 out of 61 of the deadliest cities in the United States and Canada. [Reports](#) also show that one-third of homicide victims are between the ages of 18 to 24. These staggering statistics point to a broken system that envelops young people during the most vulnerable times in their lives. The trends indicate a strong need to not only invest in intervention and prevention programs but also reinforce those efforts with effective, solutions-driven policies.

*While the city's community-based intervention model gives young people an opportunity to take real ownership of the gun violence prevention efforts in their city, high-quality programming cannot exist in a vacuum—legislative change is needed to turn the tide.*

While the city's community-based intervention model gives young people an opportunity to take real ownership of the gun violence prevention efforts in their city, high-quality programming cannot exist in a vacuum—legislative change is needed to turn the tide. In a [report](#) released by the Center For American Progress, a significant link was found between weak gun laws and high rates of gun violence. Studies have shown that states with existing gun laws, such as assault weapon bans, rank among the lowest in firearm related deaths. These findings are supported by the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, which gave Kentucky an “F” rating on its most recent [Annual Gun Law Scorecard](#). According to Giffords, Kentucky is ranked as one of the weakest gun law states, coinciding with one of the highest firearm death rates.

## Conclusion

Louisville's approach to gun violence prevention includes collaboration

between nonprofits and municipal programs that are geared towards intervening in the lives of young people most at risk. The city's belief that gun violence prevention requires a holistic approach is a fresh take on a widespread issue in the United States. Louisville understands that criminal justice reform and restorative justice practices are also critical in interrupting the cycle of incarceration and violence that many young people are caught in. These organizations should serve as a model for cities across the United States.

While programming in Louisville is laudable, these organizations and advocates should not singlehandedly shoulder the responsibility of curbing gun violence. The data provided by Center for American Progress and Giffords Law Center suggest that Louisville, and Kentucky as a whole, would benefit greatly from common-sense gun control. The state should require background checks for people looking to own a gun and require licenses for firearm owners. Laws should also work to limit the amount of firearms in the state, and help track firearms through a registration system. Preventative measures can also be taken, like requiring gun owners to report lost or stolen guns, and prohibiting the transfer of dangerous assault weapons.

Kentucky has many legislative options available to help stop the gun violence epidemic in the state. Legislators need to support measures that properly fund local organizations addressing gun violence and pass laws with the potential to save lives.

# New York, NY

By: Brittney Souza and Giovanni Rocco

Generation Progress traveled to New York, New York to report on one of the most successful youth-driven cure violence programs in the nation, Youth Organizing to Save our Streets (YO S.O.S.). The program is the youth leadership branch of Save Our Streets Brooklyn (S.O.S.), which replicates the [Cure Violence](#) model, a model that works on violence prevention at the neighborhood level across the United States. YO S.O.S. works with 14- to 29-year-olds in year-long programs to implement community-based gun violence prevention methods and trainings. Through gun violence prevention campaigns, shooting response rallies, youth councils, and leadership trainings, YO S.O.S. students are activated as leaders in their community and as advocates for their generation.

YO S.O.S. was built by grassroots organizers and transformed from a small community program in the boroughs to a major program receiving resources and oversight from the New York City Mayor's Office. New York City has established an impressive network of partnerships across community organizations in all five boroughs, in coordination with the recently established NYC Office to Prevent Gun Violence (OPGV). These community organizations like New Yorkers Against Gun Violence, the Gathering for Justice, and Youth Over Guns are working to empower young people to be leaders in their own communities. This collaboration has developed into a culture of change where youth have a seat at the table and utilize a successful gun violence prevention movement that centers the most impacted by gun violence.

## Youth Organizing to Save Our Streets

As Generation Progress staff entered the Crown Heights neighborhood, we immediately noticed that posters declaring “53 days since last shooting” were displayed in every corner store and restaurant. Save Our Streets was founded in 2009 when a mother approached the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center, now Neighbors in Action, seeking help after her son had been shot and killed in Crown Heights. Save Our Streets (S.O.S.), operating in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant, is unique to the various other Cure Violence programs across the United States for their addition of a youth organizing arm, Youth Organizing to Save Our Streets (YO S.O.S.). The model treats gun violence as a public health issue and is two-fold; training and inserting violence interrupters who are conducting on the ground mediation, as well as provide wrap-around services that treat the socio-economic issues that lead people to resort to gun violence.

While there, we met with Heather Day, the S.O.S. director of youth programs, and several of the dedicated YO S.O.S. alumni; Miguel, Karencia, Eugenia, Shavonne, and Gariyana. YO S.O.S. was founded in 2011 by a Save Our Streets staff member who was formerly incarcerated. This youth development program engages, trains, and activates, young people between the ages of 14 and 24 in the anti-violence movement. The young people mentioned that one of the initial draws to join the various programs were the opportunities to get community service credit and monetary stipends after graduation. They say that after the first week in the program, they all forgot about the stipends because they enjoyed the skills, community, and curriculum, they were surrounded by. In the seven years YO S.O.S. has been working in the Central Brooklyn neighborhoods of Crown Heights and Bed-Stuy they have served more than a thousand young people. Two of the most popular programs, the Leadership Development Program and Justice Community Plus, operate during the school year. Through an eight-month, twice-a-week program, youth ages 14 to 18 are trained in conflict de-



justice, activism, and professional development. Karencia, one of the alumni said, “I didn’t realize there were steps that occur before it escalates to gun violence. Now I know the proper de-escalation steps so it doesn’t have to get to that point.” The Justice Community Plus institute was just launched last year and have already assisted 60 young people through a year-long program which connects medium to high-risk youth ages 16 to 29 to paid opportunities for personal growth and educational achievement.

After graduating from either programs, these young people become integrated into the greater gun violence prevention movement as community advocates. Through the YO S.O.S. network, many of the young people work with other social justice organizations to put on events such as art against violence gallery shows and live performances with the Theatre of the Oppressed NYC. One YO S.O.S. graduate, Gariyana, now works as a facilitator for the theater, helping audience members take on character roles and help other facilitators brainstorm policy recommendations to aid the issues plaguing their communities. During the summer, young people continue to train in organizing tactics and youth leadership development with S.O.S. and other organizations in the community.

One of the ways in which young people work on the ground to prevent gun violence is through the shooting response system. When a shooting takes place, shooting response is activated. Youth stand with S.O.S. and other gun violence prevention-oriented community organizations at or near the place of the shooting and hold small rallies, emphasizing that gun violence should not be normal and should be addressed every time. YO S.O.S. works directly with community members but always with an emphasis of supporting young people. The program has dedicated and connected staff members who work with youth every day in the office. Heather pressed the importance of a physical space on the block that is easily accessible to the youth living in that community. Through Facebook group chats and text messages, the staff share paid internships, job opportunities, and post upcoming YO S.O.S. events. While stipends drew many organizers in, their personal connection to gun violence is what motivated them to stay engaged in the movement and

on leadership roles to educate the next generation. Shavonne said, “hurt people hurt people. That’s what I learned in here... sometimes they need more than a pat on the back or a hug, they need a place like this. This is the place they can get it.”

## The Ecosystem

YO S.O.S. is one of many anti-violence organizations working in an elaborate ecosystem filled with grassroots operations and municipal operated programs throughout New York City. The recently created NYC Mayor’s Office to Prevent Gun Violence (OPGV) operates within the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice and has been providing resources and oversight to over 22 community organization working in the five boroughs. Some of these organizations, like Gangstas Making Astronomical Community Changes (GMACC), employ formerly incarcerated, high-risk youth, and other people who have been part of the cycle of gun violence. Through the OPGV Safe in the City grant, New Yorkers of any age can apply for small funds of up to \$1,000 to implement or promote anti-violence values through community programming. Young people join the OPGV Peer Leadership Committee, also known as Peace Ambassadors, for many different reasons. Tiffany and Kiara are two young people who are part of the Committee. Tiffany joined because she wanted to be on the ground working on the most important issues of her generation, while Kiara felt the drive to be a leader in the movement after losing her brother to gun violence. During the school year, 20 young people between the ages of 16 to 24 meet monthly to plan their action during the summer and then travel to all five boroughs to host anti-violence events, like the art workshop Soles for Peace, and offer film screenings.

Through their involvement from top to bottom, young people are naturally encouraging a culture of change. Not only do these young activists fortify ties between local communities, they also bring their unique perspective to

gun violence prevention efforts, which in turn reinvigorates the movement and its activists. One way youth are being activated are through educational programs during school hours by New Yorkers Against Gun Violence (NYAGV), another gun violence prevention-focused organization. Kris Arroyo, one of our [Fight4AFuture](#) members, was first activated by attending NYAGV classes and speaking to New York legislators after losing her friend to gun violence. She now works as an Assistant Program Director for NYAGV by weaving anti-violence and gun violence prevention education in eight middle and high school curriculums. NYAGV works with the New York Department of Education to weave the curriculum into various topics, including history and ethics, and grant students school credits for their participation. At the end of the year, NYAGV travels with the students to the New York capital of Albany to speak to state legislators and advocate for gun violence prevention policies in the state. Ramon Contreras, a Generation Progress' FNLC members, became a youth activist in high school and Kris Arroyo from NYAGV mentored him through his advocacy. He founded Youth Over Guns (YOG), an organization which highlights and uplifts the great work that gun violence prevention programs are implementing in the boroughs of New York City. YOG was present at the [anti-gun march](#) across the Brooklyn Bridge on June 2, 2018, where thousands of people rallied to witness their work of uplifting black and brown people who been affected by gun violence.

*Through their involvement from top to bottom, young people are naturally encouraging a culture of change. Not only do these young activists fortify ties between local communities, they also bring their unique perspective to gun violence prevention efforts, which in turn reinvigorates the movement and its activists.*

While many gun violence prevention organizations were started by young people, some were founded by older activists, but with a clear vision of empowering youth. The Gathering for Justice was founded in 2005 by a group of elders led by Harry Belafonte who, after witnessing a news report of

five-year-old black girl being handcuffed and arrested in her Florida classroom for “being unruly,” was motivated to take action. The group started as a gathering of elders, including a group Belafonte’s friends and fellow activists from the civil rights movement. To make the organization inclusive and centered on young people, Belafonte asked each elder to bring a mentee who they hoped to take over their work. The Gathering for Justice’s initial idea of including young people sparked a culture of change that is seen even today, with Justice League NYC, the direct action arm of the organization including members as young as 16 to bring together experts and advocates from around the city to show up and speak out against gun violence and police brutality.

## Conclusion

Generation Progress encourages youth to continue to seize the reins of power, whether it is by standing up to the gun lobby, walking out to protest gun violence, or speaking loudly on how gun violence has impacted their lives.

Cure Violence programs around the country should include a youth organizing arm, like Youth Organizing to Save Our Streets. City governments should also formally create a specialized gun violence prevention unit that includes a youth council comprised of those from communities impacted by gun violence, like New York City’s Mayor’s Office to Prevent Gun Violence. Local organizations should also prioritize including young people, especially those activated by community programs, as leaders of their community and encourage them to continue advocating for their generation and the generations to come. Young people are disproportionately affected by gun violence so they should not only be included in the conversation but be leaders in the movement to protect their lives.

# St. Louis, MO

By: Charlotte Hancock, Maggie Thompson, and Giovanni Rocco

Generation Progress wanted to explore what happens when a young survivor of gun violence is elected to public office. Does this change the conversation in state legislatures or the types of bills that are introduced? Generation Progress went to St. Louis, Missouri to speak to Rep. Bruce Franks Jr. about his experiences as a state organizer and how his personal story changed the dialogue in Missouri's state capitol.

In addition to Rep. Bruce Franks Jr.'s election, recent races have ushered in elected officials intimately familiar with gun violence, such as Virginia State Delegate Chris Hurst, whose girlfriend was shot and killed on television in 2015 as she was reporting live. Some survivors of gun violence have even served in Congress, including former Arizona Rep. [Gabby Giffords](#), Louisiana Rep. [Steve Scalise](#), and California Rep. [Jackie Speier](#). But few elected officials have experiences that exist so squarely in the intersection of gun violence and the criminal justice system as State Rep. Franks. As a young black man who has experienced both gun violence and police brutality, Franks represents some of the most impacted communities, making him unique among legislators. African Americans between the ages of 15 and 29 are 18 times [more](#) likely than their white peers to be the victim of a gun homicide. While African Americans accounted for 15 percent of the population of young people in this age range, they comprise 64 percent of gun homicide victims. Franks's story is not unique in his community, but it is unique among elected officials.

At six years old, Franks's life was forever changed when his nine-year-old brother was [gunned](#) down by an exchange of bullets between two warring drug dealers. The St. Louis neighborhood where Franks grew up was no

stranger to scenes like the one that took his brother, with neighbors regularly witnessing acts of senseless violence. But while many communities look to the police to control crime, Franks observed that it was police themselves fanning the flames of violence. The fractures of understanding and trust between community and the police were only widening. This, he knew, had to change—and if nobody else was going to step up, he would.

His neighborhood had another problem. With high rates of crime, the community was also deeply impacted by the criminal justice system, with many formerly incarcerated people struggling to find stability in their lives. Franks realized that members of his own community were entirely without the resources necessary to remain drug-free and fully reenter working society.

*[Franks's] lived experiences have given him a greater understanding of what's necessary to change the criminal justice system and curb gun violence beyond simply regulating firearms. His legislative approach centers community reinvestment and utilizes measures proven to lower instances of gun violence when implemented.*

After attending Generation Progress' inaugural youth gun violence prevention summit in 2014, Bruce returned home to St. Louis where he [founded](#) a nonprofit and began work as a community liaison with the St. Louis Police Department. Within a year, Franks realized he could more directly impact his community as a legislator and in 2016 ran for, and [won](#), a seat in the Missouri state House.

## Legislating Through a Holistic Approach

Since being elected, Franks has [introduced](#) several pieces of legislation to curb gun violence, increase community investment, and improve community policing relations. His lived experiences have given him a greater understanding of what's necessary to change the criminal justice system and curb gun violence beyond simply regulating firearms. His legislative approach centers community reinvestment and utilizes measures proven to lower instances of gun violence when implemented. Franks's gun violence prevention bills include:

[HB 1585 \(5139H.01I\)](#) – Designating June 7 as “Youth Violence Prevention Day”

[HCR 70 \(5988H.01T\)](#) – Declaring youth violence as a public health epidemic and declaring June 7 as “Christopher Harris Day” in Missouri

[HB 1592 \(5400H.01I\)](#) – Requiring the reporting of lost or stolen firearms

[HB 2559 \(6503H.01I\)](#) – Authorizing municipalities and counties to pass ordinances requiring a permit to carry a concealed firearm within the municipality or county

For Franks, effective solutions go beyond common-sense gun legislation by addressing the problem through a holistic approach. Curbing access to firearms is only one piece of what must be a multipronged approach to tackling the issue. Studies have shown that [reinvestment](#) in youth programs and financial investment from both the public and private sector are part of turning the tide in communities experiencing high rates of gun violence. Franks has embraced this approach, tackling gun violence with the firearms regulation measures noted above, but also by pushing for community



reinvestment. Franks has had two notable efforts pushing for community reinvestment:

**Missouri FY2018 Budget Amendment** – Securing bipartisan support to restore funding for a youth summer jobs program, targeting young people in Kansas City and St. Louis

**HB 1775 (5442H.01I)** – Increasing community investment in local businesses through his sponsorship of a bill that authorizes a tax credit for establishing a new business in a distressed community

Franks has worked far beyond the legislative approach to address the challenges faced by his community. In the past, he's worked as a peacekeeper, serving as a liaison between neighborhood police forces and local communities during the national headline-making protests in Ferguson. He understands that de-escalation has to come from a place of security and trust that law enforcement is there to serve poor and black communities. This requires accountability for a police department that black St. Louis residents have reason to mistrust. To address distrust in the police, Franks has introduced legislation to improve community policing relations, including:

**HB 1583 (5143H.01I)** – Requiring the director of the department of public safety to initiate disciplinary action when the director is presented with any information demonstrating cause to discipline a peace officer licensee

**HB 1586 (5295H.01I)** – Establishing a "Protestors' Bill of Rights," so that young people understand their rights when it comes to protest and interactions with the police force

**HB 2327 (6237H.01I)** – Specifying procedures in officer-involved deaths and shootings by requiring the officer take a drug test and undergo a psychiatric evaluation

Today, Franks continues to serve as a liaison between the police and the community. The personal relationships built with individual police officers and community leaders have provided Missourians with a bigger platform to express their concerns with local law enforcement. Franks also works with the police department to implement revisions to their training program and community programs. There is a clear partnership in the development of a community policing model, as well as discussions following any officer-involved shooting.

## Fueling the Long-Term Movement for Solutions

Through the introduction of policies that empower young, rural, and traditionally disenfranchised Missourians, Franks has demonstrated a comprehensive view of youth empowerment. Automatic voter registration (AVR) is a policy tool that [addresses](#) some of the challenges with registering young voters and helps ensure that young people can have their voices heard on the issues that affect their lives. Put simply, AVR removes much of the bureaucratic red tape that keeps young people from voting. Some of the legislation introduced by Franks that seeks to build the power of youth and disenfranchised communities includes:

[HB 1584 \(5138H.01I\)](#) – Requiring the secretary of state to establish a system for automatic voter registration

[HB 2492 \(6279H.01I\)](#) – Modifying provisions for absentee voting

Provisions like AVR that systematically [level](#) the playing field for all Missourians serve three purposes: to increase civic participation from a greater variety of people, to improve governmental representation by including a diversity of lived experiences, and to [save](#) the government and civic sectors a substantial amount of money.

## Changing the Conversation in the Capitol

Franks's ability to speak from his lived experiences with gun violence and police brutality has enabled him to cross [partisan](#) barriers in a time where our nation is experiencing increasing political polarization and a widening partisan divide. His personal experience, often alien to many state legislators from "traditional" backgrounds, has, in several cases, trumped politics. Republican state Rep. Mike Stephens, who entered the Legislature at the same time as Franks, has publicly [said](#) he considers him a friend. And his previously mentioned FY2018 budget amendment was a result of [persuading](#) the Republican-controlled Missouri House to restore funding for a jobs program that, according to local reporting, Missouri Gov. Eric Greitens wanted to cut entirely. In July of 2018 his bill declaring youth violence a public health epidemic in the state [cleared](#) the House with zero opposition.

## Conclusion

While willpower alone has gotten Franks far in life, his success can be directly attributed to national and local funding. His accomplishments continue to happen at the state level, but his success was fostered in part by funding from Generation Progress' national program that knit together many individuals and local campaigns into a network of support. Franks continues to build the criminal justice reform and gun violence prevention movement by mentoring survivors of gun violence and young people pursuing elected office. Gun violence prevention organizers and leaders need to build a movement that invests in and empowers young people and survivors to not only tell their stories, but to attain positions of civic leadership. The message here is simple: invest in electing people who are survivors and who can best represent their communities.

# St. Paul, MN

By: Anisha Singh and Maggie Thompson

The city of St. Paul, Minnesota is implementing a public safety strategy that breaks through the standard emphasis on law enforcement. This comprehensive strategy aims to address issues like gun violence and criminal justice reform under a framework that incorporates workforce development initiatives, creates safe public spaces, and welcomes the formerly incarcerated back into civic life. St. Paul's approach is driven by Mayor Melvin Carter, 38, the first black mayor of the city, who was elected in 2017. Through a bold approach, the mayor is reshaping the city's approach to public safety, while incorporating civic engagement into everyday governance. Informed by his experience training young people as a community organizer, and his lived experience growing up in St. Paul as a black man, Mayor Carter's strategy is creating spaces and avenues that bring young people and disenfranchised communities together in a decision-making process that incorporates the voices of residents.

Generation Progress spoke with Mayor Carter and his director of Community-First Public Safety Initiatives, Jason Sole, about the work the city is doing to bring this holistic public safety strategy to life.

## A Holistic Approach to Public Safety

Mayor Carter's governing philosophy is both inclusive and audacious. His views on public safety encompass efforts that address gun violence, welcome returning citizens back to society, and creates trust between city government, law enforcement, and the community through an open and

transparent governing process. This strategy, he said, “is rewriting the social compact between our people and the government.”

Mayor Carter and his team are intentional about intersecting gun violence prevention and criminal justice reform. They recognize that not doing so often leads to overcriminalization and over-policing. He rejects what he calls the “false logic” that says that if cities build bigger jails, hire more police officers, and bring in tougher prosecutors, cities will be safer without having to address other elements of public safety. Carter notes that addressing public safety through civic engagement is the key to succeeding, “public safety on the local level is treated like terrorism on the federal level.”

There are four elements to Mayor Carter’s Community-First Public Safety Initiatives:

Connecting children and families to opportunities so people are less likely to resort to criminal activity.

Preventing crime by expanding the number of public spaces where community members feel safe.

Providing a safe and welcoming place for people reentering the community from incarceration.

Providing law enforcement, first responders, and police officers, with the trust, tools, and training necessary to be able to do their job well.

This strategy builds and expands upon the work of his predecessor, former Mayor Chris Coleman, who centered better funding for after-school programs and community centers in his community safety strategy. The public-private partnership he launched, “Sprockets,” focused on after-school program funding as a key element in addressing racial [disparities](#) in the city.

St. Paul's focus on community policing began with St. Paul Police Chief Todd Axtell, who has [pursued](#) these initiatives within the St. Paul Police Department since his appointment. Axtell [summed](#) up his approach saying, "my philosophy is pretty simple: get to know people before something happens," adding "I am a big believer in making a lot of deposits into the bank of trust." This is a sentiment echoed by Mayor Carter, the son of a retired St. Paul police sergeant. The mayor considers trust critical to keeping both officers and communities safe, saying, "trust might be the most valuable tool we can put into their toolkit." One product of the conversations between the police chief and Carter was a proposed update to the police department's use-of-force [policies](#) in January 2018, with new guidelines focused on de-escalation. For Carter and other advocates, the policies do not go far enough. A series of community conversations led to several updates that were implemented in March of 2018. While advocates are pushing for additional updates to the use-of-force policy, Carter called it a good "first step," and is working on further updates.

St. Paul's funding for law enforcement is not independent of other funding considerations. This funding is weighed alongside youth-focused programs. Carter explained that under the old model, funding choices for law enforcement often happened separately from conversations about funding for other city initiatives, with more policing standing as the solution for public safety. "That logic leaves us with no resources to help fund recreational centers, libraries, and other types of community resources that can help prevent crime before it happens," Carter said.

One of Mayor Carter's first [appointments](#) was Director of Community First Public Safety Initiatives Jason Sole. Sole, a three-time convicted felon, who persevered in pursuing an education during and despite his incarceration, worked as the director of the Minneapolis NAACP and a professor at Metro State University prior to joining Mayor Carter's team. In his early days on the job, Sole embarked on a series of listening sessions. Because of concerns raised by teens in attendance, he focused his work on remedying the effect that gun violence has on young people specifically.

Sole is also responsible for enacting Mayor Carter's vision of making St. Paul a welcoming community for returning citizens. In 2014, Minnesota became the third state to enact a "[ban the box](#)" law for both public and private employers. The law requires employers to wait until the applicant has been selected for an interview before inquiring about the applicant's criminal [history](#). Minnesota has also seen significant successes in [reducing](#) its recidivism rate through a federal program to aid reentry. With these initiatives in place, and the appointment of Sole, St. Paul is focused on [reentry](#) as key to public safety. Programs supporting successful reentry for returning citizens have been shown to have a significant positive impact on children, families, public budgets, and workforce needs.

Mayor Carter inherited a legacy that puts comprehensive public safety first. By strengthening this integrated approach and focusing on young people, St. Paul has become a model for other cities across the country.

## **A Bold Public Engagement Strategy to Bring Young People Into City Government**

While St. Paul's holistic approach and programming on public safety is notable itself, similarly important are the community engagement strategies that require citizen input, spearheaded by Mayor Carter's office. This approach, again, comes from the Mayor's background as a community organizer. When asked what he hopes to accomplish before he left his position, Carter stated, "I don't want people to know how much power I have, but how much power they have."

Prior to his successful bid for mayor in 2017, Carter served on the St. Paul City Council, a position he was first elected to in 2008, at the age of 29. During his time on the council, his work with high school students shifted the way he engaged with young people. The teens wanted to stop tobacco companies from marketing to kids with toy lighters and candy cigarettes.



Mayor Carter, rather than hearing their concerns and acting himself, challenged them to write an ordinance. With his office's guidance, the teens negotiated the language with the city attorney, secured agreements from the necessary council members and the then-mayor for their support, and successfully had the ordinance signed into [law](#). Carter noted that, "what's better than knowing the law, is knowing you can make the law." He brings this element of leadership development and training to almost every aspect of his administration.

At the beginning of his term, Mayor Carter, rather than delivering a traditional State of the City Address, turned the State of the City Address into a summit with training and listening sessions. This process led the mayor to adopt a community-based approach to the development of the St. Paul budget. The mayor's office convened a second summit and invited residents to help build the city budget. Almost 300 people took part in the community budgeting process. "People don't want you to raise their property taxes, but by having brought people together to see the spreadsheet that shows the current rate would force us to close the library on Sunday or lay off firefighters, 74 percent of attendees ultimately voted for the increase," Carter said.

*"People want to be a part of something, especially right now. People don't want to just trust that their mayor is in City Hall doing good things. People want to have their hands on this, especially young people." — Mayor Melvin Carter*

To use the power of city government to address racial and economic disparities, Carter's administration launched a community-based hiring process called [Serve St. Paul](#). As the city's first black mayor, Carter understands that disparities are often exacerbated through generations of exclusionary policy decisions. When Carter first announced this process, several reporters expressed skepticism as to whether enough people would

sign up to participate. Ultimately, more than 300 people applied, because, as Carter explained, “People want to be a part of something, especially right now. People don’t want to just trust that their mayor is in City Hall doing good things. People want to have their hands on this, especially young people.”

## Conclusion

When asked if he has trouble getting young people to attend and participate in forums and meetings, the mayor points to the youth-driven overhaul of the police department’s use-of-force policy. In the next few months, he hopes to implement a series of new youth-driven initiatives, including a \$15 minimum wage, and dedicated funding for bike lanes. “The problem isn’t that young people don’t care,” Carter said, “it’s that we are having the same conversation, in the same way, in the same place as we always have, and expect young people to come into our conversations. Young people never join anybody else’s conversation and so you have to be willing to open that space up.”

St. Paul and Mayor Carter’s approach to gun violence prevention and criminal justice reform are anchored in a holistic approach to public safety that goes beyond law enforcement. This vision of public safety is implemented through an expansive and bold public engagement strategy that deliberately brings in young people in ways that not only address the issues that they are facing today, but also trains them to be civic leaders.