



# Qualitative Evidence on the Implementation of Cure Violence in Trinidad and Tobago

Ericka B. Adams<sup>1</sup> · Edward R. Maguire<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Violence is a significant social problem in many cities throughout the world. In seeking to prevent or control violence, communities have put in place a variety of interventions. Many of these rely on the formal criminal justice process to arrest, prosecute, and imprison offenders. However, formal social control is well known to be an incomplete solution to violence. As a result, some communities have experimented with community-based solutions. One such approach is Cure Violence, an initiative that treats violence as a public health issue. Based on methods used to prevent the spread of infectious disease, Cure Violence seeks to stop the spread of violence within communities. This study presents qualitative results on the implementation of Cure Violence in Trinidad and Tobago, a two-island nation in the southeastern Caribbean near Venezuela. We conducted 36 in-depth semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with a variety of stakeholders, including program staff, residents, family members of victims, and police. Our findings suggest that the implementation of Cure Violence in Trinidad and Tobago led to educational and employment support for community members and a reduction in violence, particularly retaliation killings in the target communities. Our results are useful for understanding the factors that shape the implementation of community-based violence reduction initiatives like Cure Violence.

**Keywords** Violence · Gangs · Guns · Conflict mediation · Cure Violence

## Introduction

Violence, particularly firearm-related violence, is a serious global public health problem (Werbick et al., 2021). In the USA, firearm-related injuries became the leading cause of death for children and adolescents in 2020 (Goldstick et al., 2022). Although the USA is well-known as having the highest rates of firearm-related violence among developed nations, its violence rates pale in comparison with those in many developing nations. The Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region has the highest homicide rates in the world (Jaitman & Torre, 2017). Rates of violence vary dramatically

within the region, but in certain nations and certain cities, firearm-related violence has increased mortality rates and reduced life expectancy for certain demographic categories (Canudas-Romo & Aburto, 2019; Crawford et al., 2014; García & Aburto, 2019; Maguire et al., 2008). For example, between 2005 and 2015, approximately half (45–51%) of all homicides in the LAC region occurred in the 15–29 age group (Canudas-Romo & Aburto, 2019). Although violence touches people from all walks of life, research shows that in the LAC region, “violent deaths are strongly concentrated among young men” (Bilal et al., 2021, p. 468). Understanding the burden of violence in the region is crucial for reducing morbidity and mortality and enhancing the lifespan and quality of life for residents. Expanding the knowledge base on the implementation and effectiveness of interventions meant to reduce violence is especially important.

Cure Violence is an intervention established in Chicago in 2000 to reduce the spread of violence (Cure Violence, 2022). Since then, it has been implemented in communities around the world (Butts et al., 2015; Cure Violence, 2022). The intervention is based on a public health approach to violence reduction that seeks to detect and interrupt conflicts,

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✉ Ericka B. Adams  
ericka.adams@sjsu.edu

Edward R. Maguire  
edmaguire@asu.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Justice Studies, San José State University, One Washington Square, San José, CA 95192, USA

<sup>2</sup> School of Criminology & Criminal Justice, Arizona State University, 411 N Central Ave #600, Phoenix, AZ 85004, USA

identify and treat people at high risk for involvement in violence, and change social norms associated with violence (Cure Slutkin & Ransford, 2020; Cure Violence, 2022). It has historically employed two primary types of employees to achieve these goals. Violence interrupters (VIs) “work to detect and interrupt conflicts to prevent them from escalating into potentially fatal violence” (Slutkin et al., 2018, p. 49). Outreach workers (OWs) “identify those at highest risk and work to decrease their likelihood of violence by addressing their risk factors” (Slutkin et al., 2018, p. 49). In recent years, Cure Violence has also begun to employ community-based hospital responders who work closely with victims of violence in hospital trauma centers (Slutkin et al., 2018).

Research evidence on the effectiveness of Cure Violence is mixed. It has produced a wide range of effects over time and place, including beneficial effects, null effects, and iatrogenic effects (Buggs et al., 2022; Butts et al., 2015; Fox et al., 2015; McVey et al., 2014; Picard-Fritsche & Cerniglia, 2013; Skogan et al., 2008; Webster et al., 2013; Wilson & Chermak, 2011). A quasi-experimental evaluation using data from both criminal justice and public health sources found that Cure Violence was highly effective in reducing violence in Trinidad and Tobago, the location of the present study (Maguire et al., 2018). The fidelity of implementation for certain aspects of the Cure Violence model was low. For example, outreach workers maintained low caseloads and did not focus adequately on people at highest risk for involvement in violence. Only 40.6% of the 64 participants involved in the project were considered high-risk. This represents a significant deviation from the Cure Violence model (Maguire et al., 2018). However, three factors contributed to the success of Cure Violence intervention in Trinidad and Tobago. First, the VIs and OWs selected for the project were deeply embedded in their communities and had years of experience doing community outreach before joining the project. This provided program staff with the unique ability to engage with known and potential offenders (Maguire et al., 2018). Second, the Cure Violence team in Trinidad received training and technical assistance from the Cure Violence headquarters staff in Chicago throughout the life of the project. Third, a synergistic relationship developed between the Cure Violence staff in Trinidad and community policing officers from the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service’s “Hearts and Minds Programme.” This is unique since the staff in some Cure Violence sites report that they do not talk to the police and that the police cannot be trusted (Butts et al., 2015; Maguire et al., 2018). Understanding the impact of violence reduction initiatives is important for policymakers and public health officials who are facing high rates of violence in their cities. While numerous quantitative evaluations of these types of initiatives are available, these evaluations are often unclear about the specific activities that are undertaken in an effort to decrease violence. Moreover,

little is known about how these initiatives are implemented, including the types of challenges faced by program staff and other stakeholders. These key issues are best explored using qualitative methods.

Earlier qualitative research in Baltimore and Chicago has demonstrated the importance of certain elements of the conflict mediation process, including establishing credibility with the community and “keeping an ear to the ground” to learn about potential conflicts that may require intervention. The present study uses qualitative data from interviews and focus groups conducted with Cure Violence stakeholders in Trinidad. Our analysis focuses primarily on how the intervention was implemented, as well as the challenges encountered during the implementation process.

## Methods

### Sampling

The data analyzed for this paper were collected as part of a larger evaluation of Project REASON (Resolve Enmity, Articulate Solutions, Organise Neighborhoods), a local adaptation of Cure Violence in Trinidad. Project REASON (PR) was operational in 16 communities located in and around Port-of-Spain, Trinidad from July 2015 to August 2017. These communities were selected because they are responsible for a disproportionate amount of the nation’s crime problem. Although these areas represent only “0.5 percent of the nation’s land mass and 5.9 percent of the nation’s population, they were home to 27.5 percent of the murders and 30.1 percent of the shootings and woundings in Trinidad and Tobago from 2010 to 2015” (Maguire et al., 2018, pp. 15–16).

PR employees were nominated to their positions either by a Steering Committee composed of community stakeholders from the neighborhoods under investigation or by a local consultant who had a long career of community outreach and involvement in violence reduction efforts (Maguire et al., 2018). Nominees were screened by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) and interviewed by members of the following groups: the Cure Violence Chicago team, the TTPS, the Steering Committee, and the Citizen Security Programme. In 2015, a total of seven violence interrupters (VIs) and five outreach workers (OWs) were hired to support the program. Staff members from Cure Violence headquarters in Chicago trained PR employees on the guiding principles of the Cure Violence initiative and how to use the standardized data entry protocols for tracking violence interrupters’ and outreach workers’ activities. They also visited target communities with PR employees and provided feedback on the intervention being employed in communities.

A research team consisting of nine people collected qualitative and quantitative data before, during, and after PR's implementation from 2015 to 2018. Four of the researchers were from the Caribbean, two of whom were from Trinidad and Tobago. Three of the remaining five researchers had longstanding relationships with the communities under investigation and over a decade of experience doing research in Trinidad and Tobago. Race, nationality, culture, place of residence, gender, education, experience within the communities under investigation, and socioeconomic class rendered various members of the research team insiders and outsiders at different times during data collection (Merriam et al., 2001; Zinn, 1979). The research team was cognizant of our positionality throughout the project and how it could impact our interpretation of the data collected. Three researchers from the Caribbean, one of whom was from Trinidad and Tobago, collected the qualitative data reported here. This enabled the researchers to connect with the interviewees on issues such as race, nationality, and culture. All data collection occurred in English, the official language of Trinidad and Tobago and the primary language of the interviewees. At times, interviewees used street slang when speaking with the interviewers. When this occurred, if the interviewers were not familiar with the phrase, they requested and received clarification from interviewees.

Thirty-six semi-structured interviews and two focus groups, conducted in December 2015 and June 2017, were analyzed for this paper. All interviews were conducted with stakeholders from Trinidad since no PR communities were located in Tobago. Interviewers aimed to interview all PR staff (i.e., VIs, OWs, supervisors, and office managers). Of the 36 semi-structured interviews conducted, ten were with VIs, nine with OWs, four with PR's supervisors and office managers, six with community stakeholders (e.g., young men currently or formerly affiliated with gangs, community residents, and family members who lost loved ones to violence), three with participants, three with police officers, and one with a consultant. Some PR employees were interviewed both in 2015 and 2017. The focus group interview in December 2015 was conducted with 12 VIs and OWs, whereas the focus group in June 2017 was conducted with 10 VIs and OWs. Both focus groups lasted approximately 90 min. VIs and OWs were oversampled in this study. To prevent this oversampling from driving the themes of the results, the responses from PR employees were analyzed separately from the responses from non-PR employees.

Participants for semi-structured interviews were recruited in two ways. First, the interviewers approached all PR staff to request an interview. Employees who consented to an interview were interviewed. Second, interviewers obtained access to non-PR interviewees with the assistance of VIs and OWs. The communities where PR was implemented were characterized by high rates of crime and suspicion

of outsiders (Adams et al., 2021; Katz & Maguire, 2015), which would have made it difficult for interviewers to access these communities safely and recruit participants for this study. However, VIs and OWs were well respected within these neighborhoods, having lived in these communities and experienced/overcome some of the difficulties community members were currently navigating (e.g., poverty, lack of employment, gang involvement, and contact with the criminal justice system). VIs and OWs used their insider status in the communities to provide the research team with tours of the target communities and to introduce the interviewers to community stakeholders. During community tours, the interviewers employed convenience sampling and approached potential respondents, explained the purpose of our research project, and requested their participation. Approximately 85% of all PR employees and community members approached to participate in the study agreed to be interviewed. Interviews ranged in length from 30 min to 1 h. All interviewees provided informed consent and were over the age of 18. Interviewees received no compensation for participation in this study. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Arizona State University.

Five semi-structured interview protocols developed by the research team were used to guide conversations with interviewees. Each interview protocol had questions tailored to the following types of interviewees: (1) PR program staff, (2) additional questions for PR program staff assigned to serve as VIs, (3) community stakeholders, (4) police officers, and (5) PR participants. Interview protocols can be found in the [Appendix](#).

## Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in private offices in local community organizations, in respondents' homes and yards, and outdoors in target communities. Respondents were interviewed by one of the three interviewers.<sup>1</sup> Focus groups occurred in a large meeting room in Project REASON's office. Two members of the research team facilitated each focus group with one researcher taking detailed notes during the interviews. The VIs and OWs who participated in the focus group interviews also participated in semi-structured interviews. The questions asked during the focus groups were obtained from interview protocols for program staff, including the additional questions for VIs (see the [Appendix](#) for details). Neither the semi-structured interviews nor the focus group interviews were audio recorded.

<sup>1</sup> Interviews were only conducted in respondents' homes and yards or outside when researchers visited the communities under study. In all of these instances, we deferred to interviewees' preferences regarding where they were most comfortable being interviewed.

However, interviewers wrote detailed notes during each interview and spent time expanding upon and cleaning their field notes immediately after each interview.

Initial coding of interview transcripts began during data collection as the research team met daily to discuss initial findings (Lofland et al., 2006). The research team implemented a grounded theory approach to coding which enabled us to stay close to, and explore what was going on in, the data (Charmaz et al., 2018; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We spoke about and compared what we heard, saw, and felt during data collection. We discussed incidents of violence and examples of violence interventions mentioned by VIs and OWs. We made note of our initial understanding of interviewees' experiences and topics we needed more information about. We also asked several analytical questions of our data (Charmaz et al., 2018) including, but not limited to, "What is happening in the data?" "What are participants' main concerns?" "What is missing, implied, or unsaid?" Interviewers then used subsequent interviews to cross-check our initial findings to ensure they were consistent with interviewees lived experiences and to probe about topics we wanted additional information on. This process enabled us to look at our data in critical ways (Charmaz et al., 2018).

One researcher (the first author) uploaded the field notes and interview transcripts from 2015 and 2017 into NVivo (Version 11.4.3) and continued the initial coding of all interview questions by reading the data line by line and documenting the topics that emerged. The researcher then compared the list of topics that emerged during the research team's field meetings with the topics that emerged from the line-by-line reading of the text. From this, an initial list of codes was developed. These codes were then compared against the data and each other to elucidate the relationship between the codes. Related codes were then grouped into focused codes (Charmaz et al., 2018). The researcher used this list of focused codes to create codes in NVivo and code the data. When focused codes were related to each other, they were linked in NVivo. For example, "peace treaties," "violence interruption," and "violence reduction" were all grouped under the larger code of "intervention in community violence." The coding process helped the researcher to distance herself from the data and to avoid forcing the data into preconceived notions (Charmaz et al., 2018). Thematic saturation was achieved across the data collected (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saunders et al., 2018).

Once the data was coded, reference counts were used to identify the most dominant codes for analysis. The researcher who coded the data then met with the co-author of this paper to discuss the dominant codes that emerged from the coding process and the data that should be analyzed for this paper. The co-author agreed with the direction of the paper, and the researcher who coded the data proceeded

to the next stage of data analysis. Quotes for each dominant code to be analyzed for this paper were exported from NVivo to MS Word documents. A separate Word document was created for each dominant code. The researcher then created code memos to analyze the topics that emerged in each dominant code (Lofland et al., 2006). Memo writing enabled the researcher to explore, and develop the ideas in, the data in greater detail (Charmaz, 2008). The ideas and topics that emerged from memo writing form the basis of the information reported in the results section. As the researchers began writing the paper, the author responsible for coding the data constantly consulted and refined the code memos to determine the dominant story emerging from the quotes.

## Results

The results of our qualitative analysis of the implementation of Project REASON in Trinidad fall into two general categories: successes and challenges. Table 1 lists the most prevalent themes for PR interviewees (i.e., VIs, OWs, supervisors, and office managers) and non-PR interviewees (i.e., community stakeholders, participants, police officers, and a consultant). Responses for PR interviewees and non-PR interviewees were analyzed separately to determine the most prevalent themes for each group. Table 1 presents the themes that were consistent across both interviewee groups as well as themes that were particular to PR interviewees and non-PR interviewees.

### Successes

According to interviewees, PR's implementation resulted in many successes for communities in and around Port of Spain, the capital city of Trinidad and Tobago. The work PR employees did within communities led to (1) young people obtaining educational support, (2) community residents receiving assistance with employment, (3) a reduction in crime in the communities under investigation, (4) community members acquiring basic necessities, and (5) a reduction in retaliation killings.

### Educational Support

Residents in the communities under investigation experienced varied educational outcomes. Although some residents received passing grades in their Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) exams, which is the equivalent to a high school diploma, many young people dropped out of school or experienced difficulty completing secondary schooling. Sixty-six percent of respondents (68% of whom were PR employees) raised this issue, as exemplified by the quotes below:

**Table 1** Definition of themes/subthemes and their representation in the data

Theme/subtheme	Definition of theme/subtheme	Frequency, n (%) all interviewees	Frequency, n (%) PR employees	Frequency, n (%) non-PR employees
Successes				
Themes for both PR and non-PR interviewees				
Educational support	PR employees worked to help residents with educational advancement	25 (66)	17 (68)	8 (62)
Assistance with employment	PR employees helped residents search for and obtain jobs	26 (68)	17 (68)	9 (69)
Reduction in violence	The work PR employees did in the communities reduced crime	22 (58)	16 (64)	6 (46)
Assistance with basic necessities	PR employees helped residents access basic necessities	17 (45)	11 (44)	6 (46)
Themes for PR interviewees				
Reduction in retaliation killings	The work PR employees did in the communities decreased retaliation killings		9 (36)	
Challenges				
Themes for PR interviewees				
Lack of resources for participant activities	PR employees lacked financial resources to support activities with participants		14 (56)	
Insufficient staffing	PR needed more VIs and OWs to effectively serve their communities		12 (48)	

We have a lot of school dropouts, ... employment issues, no passes from schools (Participant).

To combat some of the difficulties community members experienced with lack of education, OWs and VIs provided them with books, encouraged them to re-enroll in school, and helped them apply for educational programs. Interviewees explained:

My clients are gang members who want to turn their lives around. Two are former inmates. We lime, we talk, I get one to go back to school. (VI).

I go to UWI (University of the West Indies, St. Augustine) to get application forms and then fill them out to get children in school (OW).

The work of the VIs and OWs was so well known in their communities that one OW received requests from parents and a principal to assist two girls who experienced difficulties in school:

Interestingly enough, it was the school principal and the parent who called me to intervene in the life of the two girls who were having problems of school (OW).

A lack of education decreases young people's abilities to secure employment. Understanding this, OWs and VIs provided educational support to the youth within their communities to increase their chances of securing legitimate employment.

### Assistance with Employment

Residents in the communities under investigation experienced a lot of difficulty finding employment. One police officer noted: "[t]he young men in the communities need jobs." And, a community stakeholder said: "sustainability is a major breakdown factor in my community. Opportunity is farfetched." VIs and OWs sought to provide individual opportunities for upward mobility to community members. They did this by helping community members with their résumés, referring residents to employment opportunities, and helping them prepare for job interviews. Sixty-eight percent of interviewees (65% of whom were PR employees) raised this issue, as exemplified by the quotes below:

I help unemployed youth find jobs; work to get youth who dropped out from school re-enrolled ... Many people are in need, so I take money out of my own pocket to carry people to work or to help them find a job. I have worked with wholesale and retail businessmen to help young men gain employment. (OW). Project REASON is really making a difference in the community because it is helping the young men in the area get work. (Community Stakeholder)

Our mission is to take youth away from gangs and place them back into jobs. We were able to replace 15 young men; we got them off the streets and



working in regular jobs. These were all young men between the ages of 18 to 20 (VI).

In helping young people access employment opportunities, OWs and VIs sought to distance them from the street economy and decrease their risk of participating in illicit activity.

### Reduction in Violence

PR communities were notorious for high violent crime rates. Citizens in other parts of the country avoided venturing into these neighborhoods, taxi drivers avoided working in these areas, and residents of these communities locked themselves in their homes to ensure their safety (Adams et al., 2021). Fifty-eight percent of interviewees (72% of whom were PR employees) mentioned reductions in crime in the communities under investigation, attributing this change to the work PR was doing. The quotes below exemplify this theme:

Crime rates are down so something is working with Project REASON (Police Officer).

Cure Violence has brought constant intervention to these communities and as a result, shootings have gone down. Crime commission is down. Robberies are down. This is important because the same people who are robbing are the ones that are shooting (VI).

These qualitative findings on violence reduction are consistent with findings from a quantitative evaluation on the effects of PR on violence (Maguire et al., 2018).

### Assistance with Basic Necessities

Many residents in the communities under investigation were destitute and experienced unemployment, inconsistent income, and food insecurity. When members of the community were struggling to provide basic necessities for themselves and their families, their primary focus became survival. VIs and OWs often assisted these residents in accessing food and other basic necessities. Forty-five percent of respondents (65% of whom were PR employees) raised this issue, as exemplified in the quotes below:

Some of the OWs tries to assist the young men in the community get work. But the work is too tiny for these guys. The money is not making a dent in what they need to feed their families. Some of these guys don't get an opportunity to get a trade. These guys are in real pain. They are hungry, not knowing where their next \$1 will come from (Supervisor).

She (OW) brings me food stuff and whenever I want to talk to somebody, I call her (Community Stakeholder).

[We are] helping children with money for books for school, lunch money, food hampers to the indigent (VI).

Helping community members access basic necessities was important for PR employees. One supervisor explained that PR employees could not keep asking community members to support their violence reduction efforts without giving them something in return:

You have to have money to deal with the youth. You have to bring something for them. They will talk to you, but by the end of the conversation they will ask you for something and you cannot always tell them you don't have...They will say "[Name removed] only on talk. He is not doing anything to help us out." They may even be really frustrated and tell you "man, I cannot hear you right now." At that point you have to leave them alone (Supervisor).

PR employees felt very strongly that helping community members with basic needs was an integral element of their efforts to influence their behavior.

### Retaliation Killings

One of the major successes of VIs and OWs was their ability to decrease retaliation killings in the communities under investigation. When homicides occurred, VIs and OWs visited the family and/or gang of the victim to support them in their grief and discourage reprisals. During conversations with mourning friends and relatives, VIs and OWs explained the ramifications of engaging in retaliation killings and implored them not to seek retribution. VIs and OWs were generally successful in preventing retaliations. Thirty-six percent of PR employees raised this issue, as exemplified by the quotes below:

I talk to the leaders to help prevent reprisals. ... A few months ago, someone got killed and I spoke to the gang leaders and it was nipped in the bud (VI).

Within my community, violence related to retaliation is the main problem. Outreach workers know people from both gangs and sometimes [a] discussion with gang members decreases the retaliation killing and sometimes it doesn't. We are successful 90% to 95% of the time in stopping retaliation killings (OW).

Interviewees viewed the decrease in retaliation killings as one of PR's major successes. VIs' and OWs' ability to reason with gang leaders and family members during their time of grief prevented reprisal killings in the target communities.

As these findings illustrate, VIs and OWs sought to reduce violence and enhance the quality of life for residents in the treatment communities using a variety of approaches.

At the same time, PR staff experienced various challenges that they believe limited their success. The next section addresses these implementation challenges.

## Challenges

The two main challenges interviewees referenced in relation to the operation of PR were (1) a lack of resources for participant activities and (2) insufficient staffing.

### Lack of Resources for Participant Activities

At PR's inception, VIs and OWs were given stipends to cover the cost of traveling to visit clients, obtaining services for clients, providing food hampers to community members, etc. However, stipends were removed several months later, thus requiring VIs and OWs to improvise. Fifty-six percent of PR employees raised this issue, as exemplified by the quotes below:

I have traveled to many places at a cost to me, including to various parts of my community to visit participants, to court, to get registration forms for people, to help people seek help with burial for their kids, etc. (OW).

I also need resources for my participants that can be as simple as money for a haircut. In some cases, I will be imploring participants to change their lives, then they will get a job interview and find me to help with money for a haircut. I don't want then a situation to arise where I do not have enough money to help, because then they will say, "you are here telling us to change our lives but when we try to you can't even help." With instances like this in mind, I think they should make about \$500-\$700 [TTD] available for us to give assistance to others (VI).

Once stipends were cut, some employees used their own money to assist community residents, while others cut back on the types of involvement they maintained with community members, opting to call them on the phone instead of visiting them in person. Overall, PR employees believed that cutting stipends made their work more difficult. Impoverished populations find it difficult to meet their most basic needs. VIs and OWs report that helping residents meet these needs, even to a very limited extent, makes it easier to enlist their help in reducing violence.

### Insufficient Staffing

Forty-eight percent of PR employees noted that the number of VIs and OWs was insufficient to address the full scope of the violence problem in the communities they served. For example:

[W]e need more staff. It is only [name removed] and myself that cover Nelson St. and the population is 20,000 plus. If we have more staff, we will be able to get to more of the youths (VI).

If I am in South and a situation occurs in Port-of-Spain, I will not be able to get there right away. We need more people to be able to do follow-up and address the gaps in service (OW).

VIs and OWs made it clear that they needed additional staff to be able to serve their assigned communities effectively. They noted that no program staff were available to cover certain high-risk communities. For instance, Belmont and Morvant were designated as target communities for PR, but no VIs or OWs were available in those areas due to insufficient staffing (Maguire et al., 2018). Overall, the challenges reported here limited the number of at-risk residents VIs and OWs could serve and meant that they were unable to mediate some conflicts that fell within their scope.

## Discussion

A quasi-experimental impact evaluation found that Trinidad and Tobago experienced "a significant and substantial drop in violence" in the treatment communities due to the implementation of Project REASON (Maguire et al., 2018). The present study sought to provide qualitative details associated with the implementation of PR in these communities based on the perspectives of various stakeholders. Our findings highlighted the successes noted by these stakeholders, as well as the challenges they faced during the implementation process. These details will be useful for those seeking to implement similar community-based violence reduction programs elsewhere.

The sixteen communities where PR was implemented in Trinidad are some of the nation's poorest communities. There is not a sufficient social safety net to ensure that residents can meet their most basic needs, including food to feed their children. Program staff told us that they sometimes gave mothers diapers and milk for their babies. These are communities where the government is often seen as antagonistic to residents and where gangs often step in to provide informal social control and basic necessities for struggling residents (Adams et al., 2021; Maguire et al., 2008). One of the reasons why PR appears to work well in these communities is that program staff have the street credibility and social networks to enter and operate within target communities where outsiders are often perceived as a threat. However, in the absence of an effective social safety net, PR employees often ended up having to spend their own money helping impoverished residents in exchange for their assistance with violence reduction efforts. Managerial and funding issues

within the PR office also hampered the ability of frontline staff to do their jobs. In spite of these and other challenges, PR was remarkably successful in reducing violence in the target communities (Maguire et al., 2018). Moreover, relationships between program staff and police were positive and mutually reinforcing, unlike in many other Cure Violence sites (Maguire et al., 2018).

The positive relationship between program staff and police officers could be based on the fact that Project REASON employees primarily interacted with police officers from the Hearts and Minds (H&M) Programme, a specialized community policing initiative that focuses on “hot spots” of violence. Hearts and Minds officers are often seen as embracing the “softer” side of policing since they implement proactive strategies to reduce crime in communities by involving residents in a range of social, educational, religious, and sporting activities (Wallace, 2014). In communities where H&M operated, 50% of residents were more accepting of the police, and 31.2% of residents felt more trusting of the police than before H&M’s implementation (Wallace, 2014). The fact that PR staff were able to achieve such dramatic reductions in violence in spite of the challenges they faced is noteworthy.

One of Project REASON’s principal successes was a statistically significant reduction in violent crime. The treatment area experienced a 38.2% drop in violent crime, while the comparison area experienced a 16.3% increase (Maguire et al., 2018). Both PR and non-PR employees interviewed for this study mentioned the decrease in crime in their communities and attributed that decline to the work of PR employees. Interestingly, only PR employees spoke about the reduction in retaliation killings. This could be because PR employees actively sought out information about crimes that were being planned in an attempt to intervene in these potential offenses. This is contrary to the “see but don’t say” approach to knowledge about criminal offenses Trinidadians had in other high-crime communities (Adams, 2012). Given the trend of killing eyewitnesses to homicides in Trinidad and Tobago (Adams, 2012; Clarke, 2009; Homer, 2009; Townsend, 2009), residents understand that possessing and sharing knowledge about crimes could be dangerous. It is possible that non-PR employees did not mention the reduction in retaliation killings because they were not actively seeking out and making connections between the homicides in their communities or they did not feel comfortable sharing this knowledge with interviewers.

The findings from this study have useful implications for researchers and violence prevention professionals interested in implementing community-based violence reduction initiatives like Cure Violence. Project REASON was successful in reducing violence in the treatment communities in spite of some implementation fidelity issues because the VIs and OWs hired for the project were deeply embedded

in their communities and had long histories of community outreach. Selecting employees who have prior experience in community engagement and strong ties to the communities where community-based violence reduction initiatives will be implemented may be a key ingredient in the success of these initiatives. For Cure Violence specifically, ensuring that OWs concentrate their efforts on recruiting high-risk participants is important for ensuring implementation fidelity. Furthermore, although Cure Violence staff traditionally provide various forms of assistance (e.g., employment and education) for their participants, Project REASON staff felt an obligation to provide services that went beyond those ordinarily provided under the Cure Violence model. In part, this may have been unique to the communities under study, where the social safety net for impoverished and marginalized people has many gaps. This finding highlights the importance of community-based violence reduction staff having access to, and connections with, organizations that provide social services to impoverished communities. Without access to these services, staff may feel obligated to devote time and resources to filling gaps in the social safety net rather than focusing primarily on preventing violence involving high-risk participants.

High-crime, low-income communities are often viewed from a deficiency perspective that focuses on what assets they are missing as opposed to what assets they have. Researchers and politicians often speak about the lack of employment, education, resources, and opportunities that characterize these neighborhoods. While focusing on what assets and opportunities these communities *do not* have is certainly valid, we often do not focus sufficiently on what assets they *do* have. Cure Violence is premised on tapping into the assets already present within these communities. These include the community organizations that seek to improve the quality of life for residents from communities experiencing serious social problems. These also include former offenders who have turned their own lives around and who are eager to serve as change agents in helping others avoid making the same mistakes they made. Our findings illustrate the power of these community assets for bringing communities together to help reduce violence.

## Strengths and Limitations

This study has a variety of strengths and limitations that should be kept in mind when evaluating the findings. In terms of strengths, the study team was given wide latitude to interview a variety of stakeholders, to visit the target communities, and to ask whatever questions we deemed suitable. We were fortunate to gain access to people and places that enabled us to understand not only the implementation process, but also the challenges faced by residents, program staff, and police in target communities that



are often inaccessible to outsiders. In terms of limitations, the study examined the implementation of Cure Violence in a unique setting, and therefore, our results may not be generalizable to other settings. A reliance on convenience sampling also limits the generalizability of our findings. In addition, we chose not to audio record interviews because we were concerned that respondents may hold back due to fear of retaliation from gang members or others. Instead, we took detailed written notes during and immediately after each interview. We viewed this as necessary given the findings from previous research in Trinidad and Tobago that identified a “see but don’t say” culture in regard to violence and gang activity in high-crime communities (Adams, 2012; Maguire et al., 2010). Nonetheless, we acknowledge that written notes provide a less complete and precise account of the information provided by interviewees than a transcript resulting from audio-recorded interviews. Finally, PR employees comprised the majority of interviewees for this study. Resource limitations made it difficult to interview a larger number and a wider variety of stakeholders. Although we did not observe any evidence to indicate that our sample was biased, a larger sample, including more interviews from police officers and community members, may have produced additional insights.

## Appendix. Semi-structured interview protocols

A: Interviews with program staff (supervisors, outreach workers, etc.)

1. Please describe the violence problem in the communities covered by Cure Violence.
  2. Are there specific areas or places, or are there specific people who are at the root of the problem?
  3. Are there other, more important problems in these communities?
  4. What responses, if any, have been tried in the past to address violence in these communities? To what extent were these efforts successful?
  5. What have you learned thus far about the violence problem in these communities and the intended response by Cure Violence
  6. What short-term successes have you seen? Failures?
  7. What’s working? What isn’t working?
  8. How was the program originally conceived?
  9. What specific intervention strategies were selected?
  10. What rules or guidelines were established to select outreach workers and violence interrupters?
  11. What initial training was provided? What about ongoing training?
  12. What activities were first implemented?
13. Have things gone as planned? If not, what obstacles emerged and how were they handled?
  14. What was the “dosage” of intervention activities (e.g. number and type of mentoring contacts, services needed, and services provided) provided to clients?
  15. If there were gaps in service delivery, what were they and how were they addressed?

B: Additional questions for use during interviews with violence interrupters.

1. Please describe your own history of arrests/incarceration.
2. Please describe your own affiliation with gangs.
3. Please describe any previous experience with street outreach/mediation work.
4. What is your Cure Violence assignment area?
5. Please assess your current knowledge about your assigned area. Do you know it well? Do you know many law-abiding people in the area? Do you know the gangs and/or criminal offenders in the area well?
6. To what extent do you feel optimistic about your ability to reduce violence in your assigned area?
7. What people or institutions exist in your assigned area that can help play a role in reducing violence? Are these people or institutions playing an active role in violence reduction?
8. What people or institutions exist in your assigned area that may make it more difficult to reduce violence? Are these people or institutions standing in the way of the Cure Violence initiative?
9. Do you feel like you are in danger when carrying out your duties? If so, what do you do about it?

C: Interviews with community stakeholders.

1. Is there a particular Cure Violence community (or communities) in which you work or reside or that you know very well? Which ones?
2. What is your role in the community? What is your association with Cure Violence?
3. Please describe the violence problem in the community.
4. Are there specific areas or places, or are there specific people in the community who are at the root of the problem?
5. Are there other, more important problems in the community?
6. What responses, if any, have been tried in the past to address violence in the community? To what extent were these efforts successful?
7. What have you learned thus far about the violence problem in the community and the intended response by Cure Violence?

8. What short-term successes have you seen? Failures?
9. What's working? What isn't working?
10. If there have been gaps in service delivery by Cure Violence, what were they and how were they addressed?
11. To what extent do you feel optimistic about the ability of Cure Violence to reduce violence in the community?
12. What people or institutions exist in the community that can help play a role in reducing violence? Are these people or institutions playing an active role as Cure Violence partners?
13. What people or institutions exist in the community that may make it more difficult to reduce violence? Are these people or institutions standing in the way of the Cure Violence initiative?

#### D: Interviews with police officials.

1. To which unit, branch, or division in the Police Service are you assigned?
2. To what extent are you familiar with the Cure Violence initiative?
3. Is there a particular Cure Violence community (or communities) in which you work or reside or that you know very well? Which ones?
4. Please describe the violence problem in the community.
5. Are there specific areas or places, or are there specific people in the community who are at the root of the problem?
6. Are there other, more important problems in the community?
7. What responses, if any, have been tried in the past to address violence in the community? To what extent were these efforts successful?
8. What have you learned thus far about the violence problem in the community and the intended response by Cure Violence?
9. What short-term successes have you seen? Failures?
10. What's working? What isn't working?
11. If there have been gaps in service delivery by Cure Violence, what were they and how were they addressed?
12. To what extent do you feel optimistic about the ability of Cure Violence to reduce violence in the community?
13. What people or institutions exist in the community that can help play a role in reducing violence? Are these people or institutions playing an active role as Cure Violence partners?
14. What people or institutions exist in the community that may make it more difficult to reduce violence? Are these people or institutions standing in the way of the Cure Violence initiative?
15. How would you describe the relationship between the Police Service and the Cure Violence initiative? Would

you describe it as a partnership? Which parts are working well and which ones can be improved?

#### E: Interviews with Cure Violence participants.

1. In which community do you live?
2. Do you work? If so, what kind of work do you do?
3. In what ways have you been involved with Cure Violence?
4. Please describe the violence problem in the community. What is causing the violence?
5. How much of the violence is gang-related? Drug-related?
6. Much of the violence involves guns. Is it easy to get a gun in the community? How much does it cost to rent a gun? To buy a gun?
7. Have you or people you care about been the victims of violence? What happened and why?
8. Do you think Cure Violence will be successful in reducing violence? Why?
9. What is Cure Violence doing well? What can be done better?
10. In what ways has Cure Violence influenced you?

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#### Declarations

**Ethics Approval** This study received Institutional Review Board approval from American University and North Central College.

**Consent to Participate** All interviewees provided informed consent and were over the age of 18.

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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