

# Justice Department officials take interest in, praise Chicago anti-violence programs

*Top agency officials visited the West Side Thursday and met with anti-violence program staff and victims of violence.*

By [Andy Grimm](#), Chicago Sun-Times

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Amy Solomon, deputy assistant Attorney of the Office of Justice Programs, meets with staff of Chicago-based community anti-violence organizations on Thursday at the UCAN campus in North Lawndale.

Chicago is known for having high levels of violence, but it's also generating buzz for violence prevention.

Top Justice Department officials visited the West Side to meet Thursday with officials behind Chicago's rapidly expanding network of community-based anti-violence programs.

In a conference room at the trauma support group UCAN's campus in North Lawndale — historically one of Chicago's most-dangerous neighborhoods — Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta praised the work and asked for technical advice — while nodding about the near-record levels of bloodshed in the city.

“We know there has been a lot of tragedy, but there has also been a lot of inspiration and hope,” said Gupta, the No. 3 official in the Justice Department.

The visit to UCAN, which was followed by a meeting in Little Village with a panel of parents who had lost children to gun violence, was not the first time Gupta has been to Chicago. As head of the department's Office of Civil Rights during the federal investigation of the Chicago Police Department, Gupta announced the Justice Department report that led to federal oversight of the department by a court-appointed monitor.

Around the same time, anti-violence programs began forming in the city, largely funded with private dollars, as homicides surged in the aftermath of the 2015 release of a video showing a Chicago Police officer shooting 17-year-old Laquan McDonald 16 times.

The DOJ has budgeted \$100 million for anti-violence programs, modeled in part on the programs that cover Chicago's most-violent neighborhoods with former gang members who recruit their one-time peers to enroll in a year- to 18-month program of therapy, educational and job trainings.

Programs in Chicago in 2022 received more than \$120 million from state, federal and philanthropic funding, a massive expansion from around \$7 million devoted to the programs in 2017.

Vaughn Bryant, executive director of Metropolitan Peace Initiatives, a nonprofit that administers grant funding for the city's network of anti-violence programs, Communities Partnering 4 Peace, said that growing programs requires long-term commitments from funders to build trust with the target population of high-risk residents and law enforcement.

"Even when there is a mistake, (police and the public) have to trust that there is accountability," Bryant said.

Chicago has a unique blend of private funding: READI Chicago and Chicago CRED, two of the most closely studied programs, each receive all or most of their funding from private sources and collaboration among a large group of organizations, said Amy Solomon, assistant attorney general of the Office of Justice Programs.

Solomon pointed to a University of Chicago Crime Lab study of READI — which at the time was led by Eddie Bocanegra, who took a leave of absence to serve as a special adviser to the DOJ's Community Violence Intervention office — as key research on whether similar programs can reduce violence.

"The READI study is really the heart of the model for (community violence intervention)" Solomon said.

While programs like READI have expanded in recent years, those years have been among the most violent on record in many cities across the country. Chicago saw murders surge by 50% from 2019 to 2020, and rise another 3% in 2021, before falling slightly last year. So far this year, the city has had 5% fewer murders than during the first five months of 2022.

"That period was such a unique period, with the pandemic and so much else going on, I don't think you can measure yet the impact of the investments we are making," Solomon said.