



## Why Individuals at the Highest Risk of Gun Violence Choose Chicago CRED

Key Findings from Baseline Interviews Highlight Promising Efforts by the Street Outreach Program

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**Northwestern Neighborhood & Network Initiative**, Institute for Policy Research,  
Northwestern University

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Photo: Alyssa Schukar for CRED/Emerson Collective

# “Why Individuals at the Highest Risk of Gun Violence Choose Chicago CRED”

Key Findings from Baseline Interviews Highlight Promising Efforts by the Street Outreach Program

by the **Northwestern Neighborhood & Network Initiative (N3)**

at the Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University

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## Introduction

Individuals at the highest risk of gun violence involvement often avoid—or find themselves locked out of—many of the systems designed to mitigate violence and its pernicious effects. This population is comprised largely of young, minority men who have aged out or were pushed out of school, who were failed by the child welfare system, and who come into frequent contact with the criminal legal system. Understandably, these men report high levels of cynicism toward the legal, educational, and healthcare systems. For these reasons and more, such “high-risk” individuals constitute a “hard-to-reach” population often requiring a comprehensive set of services alleviating both immediate personal challenges—like housing, food, or healthcare—and more entrenched inequities caused by years of trauma, disenfranchisement, and poverty.<sup>1</sup>

There is growing consensus that engaging these high-risk individuals is essential for short-term violence reduction efforts.<sup>2</sup> Two key questions remain:

1. Given this system aversion and avoidance, how do programs aimed at reducing gun violence reach and engage high-risk individuals; and
2. What motivations and/or incentives might such high-risk individuals have for accepting and remaining involved in various services?

One approach to not only identifying but also *engaging* hard-to-reach, group-involved individuals is commonly referred to as street outreach. Although street outreach has a history dating back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its contemporary practice engages individuals at the highest risk of gun violence “on the street”—where they are most likely to become involved in violence-related activities. Street outreach programs typically employ individuals with lived experiences like those they hope to engage: incarceration history, gun violence

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<sup>1</sup> Cheng, T. 2017. Violence prevention and targeting the elusive gang member. *Law & Society Review* 51(1), 42–69. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lasr.12251>

<sup>2</sup> Abt, T. 2019. *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence—and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets*. Basic Books.

victimization, and/or gang activity. Ideally, outreach workers grew up in the same or similar neighborhoods where they are employed to mediate group conflicts and redirect individuals away from gunplay.

This report details the experiences of participants in one such street outreach intervention—**Chicago CRED** (Creating Real Economic Destiny). Themes and illustrative quotes highlighting the participants' perceptions of violence, their motivations for joining CRED, and their reasons for remaining in the program are discussed at length.

## Background and Context

Chicago CRED is a nonprofit organization that takes a multifaceted approach to disrupt the dynamics that drive shootings in Chicago. Its outreach efforts target the groups most involved in gun violence and directly engage their highest-risk members. Moving beyond traditional street outreach, CRED invites young men to participate in a comprehensive intervention that includes resources like dedicated life coaching, trauma counseling, education, and biweekly cash stipends.

CRED presently operates in two communities on Chicago's South Side significantly impacted by gun violence: the Roseland and West Pullman neighborhoods. Since 2015, there have been at least 140 fatal shooting victims and 630 non-fatal shooting victims in Roseland, some of the highest rates of gun violence of any Chicago neighborhood during that time. This translates to an annual rate of approximately 75 fatal and nonfatal shooting victims per 100,000—more than three times higher than Chicago's average annual rate and more than fifteen times higher than the national average over the same period.

To date, roughly 200 participants have entered CRED's program—all of whom were considered to be at high-risk of gun-violence involvement. The vast majority (98%) of participants are African American men residing in the Roseland and West Pullman neighborhoods, and the average participant is 24 years old. All participants are group- or gang-involved, and all have lost at least one friend or family member to gun violence. About 80% have at least one prior arrest, and most have limited education and work histories. CRED participants are at a greatly elevated risk of violent victimization—78% previously suffered a gunshot injury or assault.

The **Northwestern Neighborhood & Network Initiative (N3)** currently serves as CRED's research partner, analyzing the program's impact on its participants and their communities according to key metrics (i.e., violent behavior and/or victimization). In addition to ongoing quantitative analyses of CRED-engaged individuals and groups, N3 has conducted 16 months of field observations and more than 24 interviews aimed at highlighting the rich, nuanced accounts of participants' lives and program experiences. Through longitudinal life-course interviews, N3 is exploring CRED participants':

1. Experiences, opinions, and beliefs surrounding the program, including their relationships with program staff;
2. Narratives about their lives and neighborhoods, and how these narratives relate to their decision to participate in the program; and

3. Backgrounds and histories, to understand the multitude of contextual factors that may hinder or facilitate program progress and success.

The findings presented in this brief are based on 20 initial interviews with new CRED participants, as well as insights from more than 16 months of ongoing field observations that began in 2019.

## Perceptions of Violence

All of CRED’s participants have experienced gun violence firsthand—each of the interviewees reported that at least one of their relatives, friends, or other loved ones had been shot. Many shared stories of having been shot at, or in, the vicinity of gunfire on multiple occasions. At the time of their interviews, **94% of respondents reported being the target of violence at some point in their lives**. This direct exposure in participants’ personal lives and social networks—in addition to living in a community area with elevated rates of shootings—contributes to their belief that **gun violence is everywhere and is getting worse**.

**“[My cousin] got shot two days before my prom. That was in May [2019]. Then, he passed away in November. Then in November, November 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>, two people I knew got killed on the same day on two different shootings. My cousin died three days after that, and that was all in November.” —CRED participant**

Many of the participants discussed **moving to different neighborhoods**, either to avoid violence or for work or other family obligations. The participants reported **an average of 3.27 moves during their lifetimes**. While new surroundings brought some relief, the interviewees described how changing neighborhoods often further **disadvantaged them**. As residents of a new community, they had to quickly learn the nature of neighborhood conflicts and how to safely navigate their new terrain.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, their emotional and social ties to their previous neighborhood and its networks remained strong— old conflicts lingered, and the newfound physical distance did little to ease the deep concern participants felt when they heard about shootings there. “I still, like, I got family and friends that live over there,” said one participant. “It’s like when I hear stuff, I gotta call around and make sure everybody good before I jump to conclusions like the worst comes to worst. I hope nothing ain’t bad happening to them.”

According to participants, **concern over gun violence seeps into nearly every aspect of their lives**. Leaving home, even to come to CRED, is risky—not to mention visiting family, walking through the park, or making a quick run to the store. Even inside their homes, neighborhood conflicts can be sparked and rekindled on social media. For most of the participants, feeling truly safe is a rarity. One participant said, “The things I’ve been through in my 24 years, I be feelin’ like anywhere outside of my house or my relative’s [is dangerous]. I be feelin’ like it ain’t really safe anywhere.”

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart, F. 2020. *Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music, and the Power of Online Infamy*. Princeton University Press.

There is often tension in how participants describe the nature of the violence in their lives. At one end, shootings were predictable, if not inevitable. Cyclical, unresolved conflicts—at times even predating interviewees’ own group involvement—drive the violence in and around these participants’ lives.<sup>4</sup>

**“You can’t just take back something that happened—like somebody homie get killed and then you kill their homie. You can’t just accept them and be cool with them after that. Not like that.” —CRED participant**

Yet, **gun violence also felt unpredictable**—there wasn’t always certainty about *when* a shooting would occur, *who* would be the target, or *what* might motivate an attack. Several participants shared harrowing stories of **mistaken-identity and stray bullet fatalities** that they heard occurred in their own communities, and across other parts of the city. Another unsettling phenomenon for participants was a perceived lack of trust within cliques and groups. According to participants, **getting “snaked” or “backdoored”**—slang for being set up or betrayed—by an individual thought to be an associate or friend was a real possibility.

**“People used to come and shoot at us all the time. I was literally 13, 14 years old. We used to be out on the block, school, playing basketball. They would come shooting at us thinking that we were somethin’ that we not. They actually really forced us into somethin’ that we didn’t even wanna be in.” —CRED participant**

## Why CRED?

It is against this complex and challenging background that Chicago CRED outreach workers engage the groups most active in Roseland’s gun violence, building relationships with and recruiting these groups’ most at-risk members into the program. Despite the persistent violence surrounding them and the hopelessness that often results from such visceral experiences with violence, CRED participants were able to identify several key features of the program that compelled them to join and remain engaged.

### Reasons for Joining

Participants were asked what ultimately encouraged them to enroll in Chicago CRED. Four themes emerged from their responses:

**Avoiding violence and “trouble.”** Ongoing conflicts were a major push factor leading to their enrollment in CRED.<sup>5</sup> “Staying out the way”—specifically, avoiding group-related violence—was a recurring theme. Similarly, previously

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<sup>4</sup> Sierra-Arévalo, M., and A. Papachristos. 2017. Social networks and gang violence reduction. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 13(1): 373–93. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-110615-085017>

<sup>5</sup> Roman, C., S. Decker, and D. Pyrooz. 2017. Leveraging the pushes and pulls of gang disengagement to improve gang intervention: Findings from three multi-site studies and a review of relevant gang programs. *Journal of Crime & Justice* 40(3): 316–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0735648X.2017.1345096>

incarcerated individuals considered joining CRED to be a protective factor against returning to jail or prison. The interviewees connected their weariness from past victimization and incarceration to their program readiness.

**“I’m just gettin’ tired of being lost. I wanna better myself and I’m getting to the age where I’m supposed to be either ... It’s now or never to me.” —CRED participant**

**Internal motivations.** Several participants cited more personal, if not psychological, motivations for joining CRED. Participants discussed nagging feelings that “I just needed to make a change for myself,” and how the program’s resources provided attainable means to accomplish their preexisting life goals. The interviews suggest that participants who were internally motivated were less hesitant and more enthusiastic about joining CRED than other participants. “I had a little motivation, but I ain’t gonna lie. This motivated me more,” said one participant. “I got a diploma. Now I got a job. I’m gettin’ paid to do what’s right. You can’t beat it. I just feel like if I didn’t do it, I’d be cheatin’ myself.”

**Encouragement from family and close friends.** As a sort of pull factor, CRED’s group-level engagement strategy permeated participants’ social networks and influenced their decisions to enroll in the program. Nearly half of the interviewees mentioned that members of their clique or friend group had preceded them as CRED participants. This gave the program credibility on two fronts: participants’ respected associates deemed CRED trustworthy enough to join, and participants connected these friends’ positive life changes to CRED involvement. One participant, speaking about CRED’s impact on his cousin’s lifestyle, said, “I seen how it—how his life changed. ‘Cause he was out there, you feel me? All his peoples that I knew—all the peoples that he knew—they was in it, a lot of them. A lot of them changed for the better.”

**CRED’s recruitment efforts.** Intentional, strategic outreach from CRED staff played a decisive role in several participants’ decision to commit to the program. Life Coaches and Outreach Workers were described as both persistent recruiters and authentic models for personal transformation. According to participants, their credibility stems from two, intertwined characteristics: These staff members’ past involvement in street activity positions them as understanding mentors, while their current success serves as implied, yet compelling, evidence for CRED’s effectiveness.<sup>6</sup>

**“They the same as me. The mentors, they been there. They been there where I been. When I was workin’ at a job, sure they—most of them ain’t never been there, ain’t never been—did what I did.” —CRED participant**

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<sup>6</sup> One participant shared that a judge had referred him to CRED as his recent criminal case was adjudicated. While anomalous, this case suggests an additional possibility for high-risk population engagement outside of the outreach-worker-neighborhood-clique dynamic.



## Reasons for Staying

Our interviews also explored why these newly enrolled CRED participants decided to keep coming back for services. Another four themes emerged from their responses:

**Realizing immediate benefits.** The most commonly cited reason for remaining in CRED was the abundance of perceived benefits received through program involvement. In addition to the sheer scale of available resources, the participants were surprised by their ability to access them quickly. While the stipend payments were described as a key incentive, less material benefits were also often mentioned by participants.<sup>7</sup> For example, access to mental health support and the high school equivalency program were frequently mentioned as key benefits. For many newly enrolled participants, CRED overdelivers on their expectations formed via word-of-mouth and outreach worker recruitment. One participant shared, “I changed a lot ‘cause I used to be like a hothead. I used to be doing all type of crazy stuff. They hooked me up with therapy programs, and just talking to certain people, so they can put me on the right track.”

**“Positive vibes.”** The welcoming, family-like energy at CRED’s sites kept participants coming back. Almost all participants mentioned experiencing these “good vibes” whenever they entered a CRED site. While they could not always precisely identify what factors generated this positive environment, the participants remembered clearly how they felt at CRED—comfortable, understood, and safe. Counteracting participants’ perceptions of violence as inevitable, CRED was a place where peace and safety became predictable. Embracing this respite from violence and consequent anxieties, participants valued the opportunity to focus on other needs and concerns.

**“It made me feel like—it’s really people that care about you. You will be thinking, like, ‘Man’—you know, all the stuff people say—‘Nobody care about me.’ I think some of these people here probably care about you more than your own family, man. They make you feel like you somethin’. It gives you motivation to push.” —CRED participant**

**Fulfilling relationships.** In addition to serving as a contributing factor to the welcoming environment discussed above, fulfilling relationships were almost unanimously mentioned by participants as key to keeping them connected to CRED. Clinical staff and outreach workers were most frequently praised by the participants; the former for their affirming and non-judgmental listening, and the latter for their sincerity proven through service. Significantly, these interviews occurred early in participants’ experiences with CRED (within two weeks of enrollment). Given the mistrust participants often experienced within their own social circles as a result of the violence permeating their daily lives, their willingness to practice the vulnerability necessary to establish trusting and deep relationships suggests CRED’s personnel is a key organizational strength.

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<sup>7</sup> CRED participants are compensated for their compliance and progress according to their status in the program.

**“I can sit here and talk to guys. We can share our stories and come to solutions, like, ‘Man, we went through this.’ Then, you got therapy. You can sit there and just express yourself. You ain’t got nobody judgin’ you. That’s why I be, like, it’s a success. It’s no judging.” —CRED participant**

**CRED as a means toward self-improvement.** Many participants shared professional, educational, and personal goals they had nurtured for years but, for a variety of reasons, had not taken meaningful steps toward fulfilling them. This group recognized CRED’s resources and networking potential as a local, low-risk springboard towards achieving their goals, which increased the program’s value. For younger interviewees—particularly those under the age of 22—participating in CRED was the first time they had received specialized career guidance. Reflecting on past mistakes and neighborhood disinvestment, several participants considered leaving the program akin to sabotaging their futures by squandering a prime opportunity. “I haven’t been takin’ care of what matters. I wanna take care of my son,” said one participant. “But I never—I always been procrastinatin’. How you really wanna take care of your son if you’re not doin’ things that’s gonna help you take care of your son? I’m just tryin’ to get there. I’m tryin’ to be a man.”

**Ambivalence.** While a small minority, a few participants offered more lukewarm responses to questions about why they had remained at CRED—this, despite reporting generally positive opinions of staff and CRED workshops. These participants described the program as “something to do,” a commitment not requiring much effort, and as an experience too new to make a judgment about. This may be due to the systems-aversion and cynicism understandably common in this high-risk population. These interviewees should receive special attention in the next round of analyses to identify and understand the nature of any changes to their motivations to stay in CRED.

**“I really got no feel for it yet ‘cause like I said, I just got in. I really can’t give it no rating. I can’t say it’s good or bad. I can only say it’s good off of what I heard. But me, I’m not the type of person that just go off of what I hear. I wanna see further. That’s why I’m here.”  
—CRED participant**

## Conclusion

The findings reported here offer an important baseline understanding of how participants’ experiences with violence relate to both the way in which they navigate their neighborhoods and social networks, and how they receive programs—like CRED—designed to mitigate violence’s impact on their lives. These findings highlight key insights into the reasons why participants decide to enroll and remain responsive to CRED and its services. The longitudinal nature of N3’s qualitative evaluation relies heavily on this baseline data to track and understand shifts in participants’ attitudes, goals, and behaviors over the course of the larger study. In the year to come, N3 will continue to collect interview and observational data on participants to more fully understand how they navigate the program and the changing world around them.



What follows is a brief narrative case study derived from one participant whose interview responses were particularly emblematic of the identified themes. Direct quotes have been included in the case study to illustrate shifts in the participant’s mindset regarding violence, and its impact on his decision to join CRED.

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### **Aubrey’s Story: An Extended Case Study**

While the themes presented in this report might appear discrete—or even distinct—from each other, they are in reality interwoven into the lives of the young men we interviewed in deeply complex ways. To provide a clearer sense of this complexity, we provide an extended case study on Aubrey,<sup>8</sup> a 19-year-old CRED participant.

Although still a teenager, Aubrey has spent a large part of his life surrounded by violence. He remembered shooting his first gun at 13—hesitant to get involved with the active groups in his area. He eventually accepted gang life as what came with growing up in the Lakeland community. Though that first shot felt foreign to him, gunplay eventually became routine.

Coming of age in his neighborhood, Aubrey felt like he had a target on his back “24/7.” He had lost several friends to street violence, and each time it hurt. Over time, his immediate recourse to these losses became retaliation. His short fuse earned him a nickname on the street: “Spazz Out.” He recalled—a week or two after his close friend had been killed—initiating a shootout in broad daylight. That was the incident, Aubrey said, that first pushed him to reflect on how deeply his actions were affecting his community. Even close friends in his crew began telling him he was “tripping,” and needed to calm down.

Not long after that incident, some of Aubrey’s friends told him about Chicago CRED, and encouraged him to take advantage of the program:

**“They told me, ‘No, bro, go. Go up there to Chicago CRED, they gonna help you.’ [But] I just wanted to kill, to fight, to shoot, to die. Like, that’s all—that’s all my mind was on.”**

**—Aubrey**

Aubrey says he didn’t jump at the offer to join CRED right away, but a near-death experience a few months later finally drove him to try and change his lifestyle. Aubrey was walking behind the local McDonalds when shots suddenly rang out all around him.

**“I’m tired of running and ducking and shooting. Boy, I’m tired of this. ... That’s the night that I really decided CRED was for me.” —Aubrey**

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<sup>8</sup> All participant-identifying information—including names, nicknames, neighborhoods and street names—has been removed, and the participant’s name has been changed to protect his privacy.

“I hear, ping, ping, they let off like 30-some shots. ... I ducked behind the garbage can,” he said. When Aubrey realized he was the target, he began running for his life. After barely surviving that attack, Aubrey said he was fed up:

Aubrey walked into CRED’s outreach office and met his Life Coach, Mr. Robinson. Unbeknownst to Aubrey, some of his friends in the program had been telling Mr. Robinson to recruit Aubrey into CRED. Mr. Robinson was from the neighborhood and had spent many years active in gangs before becoming a violence prevention specialist. Aubrey saw himself in Mr. Robinson, and it motivated him to know that he had someone in his corner who’d turned their life around. Within weeks, Aubrey proved his commitment to change, and Mr. Robinson formally enrolled him as a CRED participant.

Although he’s relatively new to the program, Aubrey says his goals have already changed significantly:

**“My goal before the program was to find a way to get some money. That means robbing, killing, shooting, and staying alive. ... I done did it all. Now it’s like, ‘I’m just trying to chill back, cool, survive. I’m basically just trying to stay alive.’” —Aubrey**

While safety was Aubrey’s primary goal both before and during his CRED participation, the resources and relationships he now accesses through the program are making that goal both attainable and sustainable. The 19-year-old father also credits his two children for his determination to leave his life of violence behind.

“I stay with my daughter, I come to CRED. I try to get a job. I try to stay busy,” Aubrey said. “Cause if I don’t stay busy, I’m not going to stay safe.”

The **Northwestern Neighborhood & Network Initiative (N3)** promotes new ways for faculty, experts, and students at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research to engage communities, civic partners, and policymakers to address core problems facing the residents of Chicago and surrounding communities. Specific projects and types of engagement will be linked by a focus on how the social relationships among networks, geographic communities, and the constellation of groups, organizations, and civic partners affect what we feel, think, and do—and how understanding, building, and leveraging this sort of network-thinking can improve neighborhoods, the city, and our region.

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### **N3 Report Contributors**

**Dallas Wright**, N3 Project Manager

**Lester Kern**, Graduate Research Fellow, University of Chicago

**Durrell Washington**, Graduate Research Fellow, University of Chicago

**Briana Payton**, Graduate Research Fellow, University of Chicago

**Kevin Barry**, Graduate Research Fellow, Northwestern University

**Soledad McGrath**, IPR Research Professor and N3 Executive Director

**Andrew Papachristos**, Professor of Sociology, IPR Fellow, and N3 Faculty Director

*For more information about this report or N3, please contact Andrew Papachristos at [avp@northwestern.edu](mailto:avp@northwestern.edu). Follow N3 on Twitter [@N3Initiative](https://twitter.com/N3Initiative).*