

ONE SMALL SHIFT

How would violence prevention change if every Chicagoan made one small shift towards creating a city where young people belong?



table of contents

<u>Introduction</u>	3
<u>What Our Young People are Experiencing</u>	6
<u>What Any Chicagoan Can Do</u>	13
<u>Shift #1: Build Relationships with Young People</u>	14
<u>Shift #2: Learn More About Your Community</u>	20
<u>Shift #3: Change Your Mindset</u>	26
<u>Shift #4: Identify Your Network</u>	31
<u>Shift #5: Take the First Step</u>	36
<u>Appendix</u>	42
<u>Activity #1: Map Your Moments</u>	43
<u>Activity #2: Unearth Your Perceptions</u>	45
<u>Activity #3: Find Your ‘One Small Shift’</u>	47
<u>Resources</u>	50
<u>Sources</u>	51



violence

We talk about it like it appears out of nowhere –
a headline, a statistic, a moment.

But it doesn't start there.
It starts much earlier.
Much quieter.
In thoughts
rather than actions.

Young people are
questioning their sense
of belonging, their safety,
their assurance of
feeling valued.

Sometimes loudly,
obviously – in ways we
recognize. And sometimes quietly –
in exclusion, in hurtful words or
actions, in harm that builds
long before it is ever seen.

These questions, and a lack of answers,
can leave a young person feeling
isolated and disconnected. And it is in that
disconnection where violence can take root.

Connection is the key to a young person's sense of safety.

**"whispers in the kitchen,
Phone calls too late at night"**

**"some kids grow up with bedtime stories.
Some of us grow up with survival stories."**

**"kids go searching
Not for trouble,
But for belonging."**

This excerpt is from seventh grader Damiya Myers' poem on the impact of violence in her South Side community and her ideas on how youth can reduce violence.

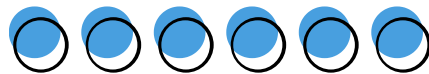
When young people feel safety, belonging, and support at school, research shows that rates of violence, bullying, and victimization decrease.

Their sense of safety contributes to our sense of safety.

Safer communities mean more kids can learn. People are healthier. Families are more stable. Neighborhoods are thriving, instead of just surviving. Opportunities expand, and what's possible begins to feel within reach.

Our city grows stronger – economically, socially, and collectively. And it all begins with young people.

Whether you live in Chicago or work here, whether you have children or not, whether you engage with young people daily or simply share the same spaces, you play a role in creating the sense of connection and belonging that is necessary for young people to thrive.



In the following pages you will hear stories and ideas. You will gain perspective from people across the city, across roles, sectors, and lived experiences. You will find your own way, big or small, to help make our city, our home, a safer place for everyone. One small shift can make a big impact.

This is not another report. This is not just a collection of data or a list of resources (although data and resources are important, too).

This is an invitation – to see your role, to take part, and to help create school communities where every young person feels safe, valued, and like they truly belong.

These perspectives and recommendations were compiled by the Violence Prevention Catalyst Team, a collaborative group of educators, community violence interrupters, parents, students, business leaders, and public safety officials who convene regularly to understand and address the root causes of violence in Chicago schools.

Chicago has made tremendous progress in reducing violence, building upon decades of work led by community organizations, violence interrupters, schools, advocates, faith leaders, public agencies, and residents across the city.

These efforts matter, and investment in them matters, too. Funding helps sustain programs, create opportunities, and connect young people to critical support systems. But regardless of funding cycles or policy shifts, one thing remains constant: we are still here.

The responsibility of creating communities where young people feel safe, valued, and connected does not belong solely to systems or organizations – it belongs to each and every one of us. We all play a role in shaping the environments that young people exist in.



what our young people are experiencing

"The sound of sirens echoed in the distance, blending with the sound of the city as Samara sat on her bedroom floor, staring at the blank page in her notebook..."

She picked up her pencil and began to write...

'Violence isn't just about anger. It's about feeling like you don't have choices. It's about needing to be seen and heard, needing to belong, needing to survive.'

As the words filled the page, Samara realized something. If kids fought because they felt alone, maybe the answer wasn't just stopping the fights, it was making sure people didn't feel alone in the first place."



These poignant words were written in 2025 by Jade Lee, a seventh grader on the Far South Side, in her short story "A start." They encapsulate growing research about the causes of youth violence and the current experiences of Chicago's young people.

‘Unforgiving places’

Jens Ludwig, an economist at the University of Chicago, conducted years of research into the causes of gun violence. His study found that many homicide cases involving juveniles began simply with an argument – not premeditation.

His research found two promising strategies for violence reduction: changing young people’s behavior (how they regulate their emotions and deescalate conflict) and changing their environment from “unforgiving places” to ones that reduce their high-stress response.

Recently, Chicago has experienced several highly publicized gatherings, or “teen takeovers” of youth downtown. Unfortunately, in several cases, these events have resulted in arrests and unsafe conditions.

These moments have become flashpoints for the public. Some have called for stricter law enforcement, while others have expressed concern for safety. But these events have also raised deeper questions:

**Where are the spaces where young people
feel welcomed, connected, and valued?**

Where are safe environments for them to gather?

If “unforgiving places” are environments where stress, instability, anonymity, and conflict heighten risk, then violence prevention also requires creating the opposite – spaces where they experience belonging, safety, trusted relationships, and meaningful opportunities to engage with one another and their communities.

Violence, trauma, and disconnection

While the city has experienced an overall drop in crime, community violence remains a daily reality for many young people.

Four in 10 Chicago high school students reported seeing someone get physically attacked, beaten, stabbed or shot in their neighborhood, with Black and Hispanic students more likely to encounter these acts. More than 20 percent reported witnessing violence weekly.

In addition to experiencing violence, too many young people are disconnected from the systems around them. Chronic absenteeism, disengagement, bullying, and lack of belonging continue to shape many students' school experiences. Nearly three-quarters of youth reported having a trusted adult at school, but nearly one in four said they lacked safe, welcoming spaces to gather with peers.

Together, these findings reinforce what research continues to show: violence prevention is deeply connected to whether young people feel known, supported, emotionally safe, and valued.

The youth mental health crisis

Exposure to violence is not the only challenge young people face. Mental health issues continue to persist at alarming levels.

Forty percent of Chicago high school students reported feelings of hopelessness and sadness that interfered with their daily function. This challenge is compounded by limited access to consistent mental health support and disparities in the availability of trauma-informed care across communities.

At the same time, research consistently shows that school connectedness and supportive relationships with trusted adults can act as protective factors against mental health issues, violence exposure, and other risk factors.

The impact of a trusted adult

In a 2025 survey conducted by [Communities In Schools of Chicago](#), more than 300 students in 24 schools reported concerns about bullying, physical harm, and emotional well-being, and they expressed the need to be seen, heard, and accepted for who they are.

Young people emphasized the impact that supportive adults in their school had on their desire to come to school and feel like they belong.

When asked, “What do you need to feel like you belong in your school community?” students answered:

[Check out all the student quotes HERE](#)

That my voice is heard, my ideas are considered, and that I feel a level of respect.

I need to have friends and adults or kids who support you and care about you. When you know that people won't bully you or say mean things about you.

Comfort, friends, and people that you trust.

When I can be myself and feel like I'm a valued part of the community, that's when I truly feel like I belong.

I need to feel invited and safe to feel like I belong in my school community.

To feel like I belong, I need to be treated with respect, feel valued, and have genuine connections with peers and staff.

Something that I need to make me feel part of the school community is that they support us and understand us, because as students we also need adults to understand us, support us, and help us.

I need to feel included and that people hear my voice.

Having more opportunities to make decisions.

“I feel like a lot of students feel like they cannot speak honestly about stuff like ... family issues, mental health, without being judged or told to act differently about those things.”

– Jaylen Trice, eleventh grade

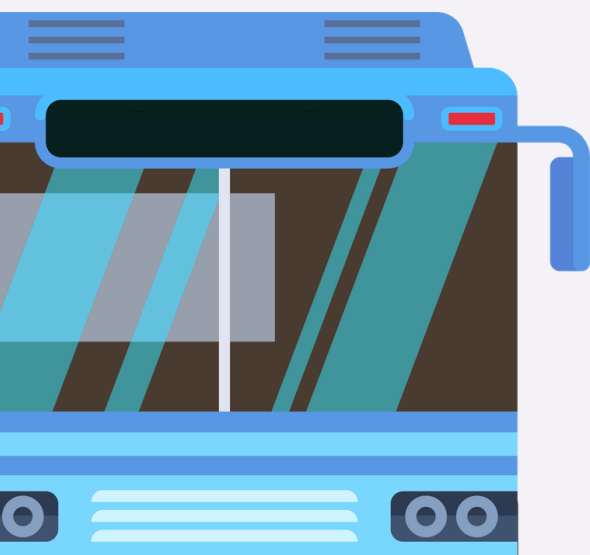
About 40 minutes. That’s how long Jaylen’s commute is every morning. During one of his commutes, Jaylen ran into Daryl – another fellow commuter – who was being loud, again.

Other bus riders pulled away, but Jaylen chose to approach Daryl. “Why are you being so loud at 7 in the morning?” he asked. Daryl was agitated. I can do whatever I want – it’s my neighborhood – he said. “Who’s gonna do what about it?” he challenged Jaylen.

Instead of arguing with Daryl, Jaylen chose to go in a different direction. He asked him if he had ever been anywhere outside of Chicago. The answer was no. “I was already expecting him to say no,” Jaylen reflected. “It really just made me sad for his situation.”

Jaylen realized that Daryl’s environment had narrowed his sense of what is possible. “It gets the thought in their head that, hey, this is all there really is,” he explained.

Jaylen’s environment was once similar to Daryl’s. It changed, though, when he was able to visit Washington, D.C. as part of the Do the Write Thing program. Now, he believes that violence prevention comes down to communicating with different people, experiencing new places, and learning about perspectives and ideas beyond your purview.



**“You could be that person that could stop somebody from hurting somebody else or hurting themselves.”
–Summer Bell, tenth grade**

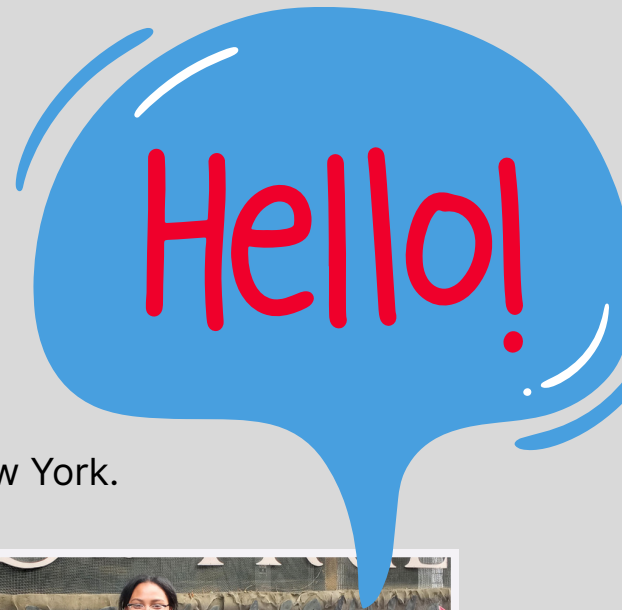
For Summer, belonging is tied to predictability, trust, and honesty. “A lot of cases in youth violence [involve people who] don't feel belonging,” Summer said, “[people who have] been bullied, been marginalized, or been oppressed.”

Summer believes that ordinary people – not policymakers or law enforcement – are the ones who create the predictability, trust, and honesty that young people so desperately need. They're the ones who provide the listening ear and the safe space for students.

“What all people really need to do to stop violence is be that support system, be that safe space, be that person that makes everybody feel like they belong,” she said. Even something as simple as greeting someone on the bus matters.

“You never know what somebody is going through,” Summer explained. “You could be that person that could stop somebody from hurting somebody else or hurting themselves.”

With supportive adults around her, Summer has continued broadening her own horizons. She is currently preparing for a pre-law program in New York.



“If you don’t have the right care that you need, you’re gonna start gravitating towards the bad.”
—Jade Lee, eighth grade

Jade Lee is an entrepreneur and a leader, but she recognizes that not everyone at her elementary school is getting the support they need. Schools often celebrate athletes or bigger student groups, but some young people feel invisible, Jade said.

When young people are isolated – and face untreated mental health challenges – they can be pushed toward dangerous paths, she said. “If you don’t have the right care that you need, you’re gonna start gravitating towards the bad.”

Jade believes solutions do not have to start with changing massive systems. They can begin with adults creating spaces where young people feel heard, valued, and safe, as well as broader solutions like community-based support groups, inside and outside of school.

For Jade, safety looks like neighborhoods with parks and libraries, kids riding scooters freely, and adults interacting positively with youth, like police officers stopping to play basketball with kids. When young people are supported consistently and included intentionally by adults, communities will be safer, Jade said.



Though the challenges that Chicago youth face are daunting, safety and belonging are proven solutions. Studies have shown that when young people feel cared for, supported, and accepted at school, they experience less peer victimization and school violence, less engagement in risky and violent behavior, more likelihood they will intervene in bullying situations, more protection if they have been exposed to adversity, and lower levels of substance abuse and better mental health.

ONE SMALL SHIFT

What Any Chicagoan Can Do to Create a City Where Young People Belong

Instead of asking, "How do we stop violence?" we asked ordinary Chicagoans – educators, community leaders, parents, individuals working directly with young people – "How do we help every young person feel like they belong?"

Here's what they said.



SHIFT #1:

build positive, meaningful relationships with young people



Violence prevention doesn't start with systems; it starts with relationships.

- Learn a young person's name and interests.
- Offer encouragement. Be present.
- Have real conversations – Listen without judgment. Speak to them honestly and directly. Value their perspective in return.
- Treat them with dignity and respect – Work to become more aware of any biases you carry. Respect reinforces self-worth, and self-worth shapes behavior.



Read on for community insights, or use one of the following resources to kick things off.

Map your moments.

When and where do you encounter young people?

Unearth your perceptions.

What are you bringing with you? Where is your starting point?



**“If you can build a relationship with one kid in your life, it makes a big difference.”
—Debra Giunta, Design Dance**

For nearly two decades, Debra Giunta has provided enrichment to Chicago students. She launched Design Dance in 2008 to bring dance education to more of the city’s young people and Prismatic in 2016 to focus on social and emotional skill development. Relationships are at the center of Debra’s work.

“I think if you can build a relationship with one kid in your life, it makes a big difference,” she said. It doesn’t have to be some blockbuster movie-style intervention. It can be a neighbor you ask, “Hey, how’s it going?”

“If you feel connected in your community, if you know there’s a neighbor down the street that pays attention to you and knows what you’re doing, it makes you feel a sense of accountability and connection and community,” she said.

And for young people, community relationships can be just as transformative as parent relationships. They expose young people to different opportunities, ideas, career paths, and even people themselves. Debra’s hope is that community organizations can work more collaboratively with teachers, counselors, and parents to align their support.



“Our kids remember how adults make them feel. Speak with respect. Use their names. Look them in the eye.”

— Jose Santiago, School Administrator and EdD Candidate — UIC College of Education, Urban Education & Leadership Program

Jose Santiago’s educational journey was challenging, to say the least. At just 13 years old, Jose was forced to navigate the juvenile justice system after an incident on the schoolyard became a violent felony. After obtaining his bachelor’s degree, he decided to give back to young people and work as a juvenile justice specialist and later as a supervisor.

After eight years with the State, Jose decided to become an educator and support at-risk and in-risk youth. He believes that every student, regardless of their behavior or background, deserves to feel safe and welcomed at school. Any behavior incident or act of violence tells us a story, Jose said, about that individual’s essential needs being met.

At his school, Jose creates a non-negotiable culture of respect and dignity. “I want kids to know that the school is a hub of safety,” he said. “I want them to walk away from their interactions with staff thinking, ‘I know I matter here and I’m worthy. The adults in this space see my potential, not my transgressions.’”

And this culture of respect and dignity is something he believes every Chicagoan can contribute to. “Our kids remember how adults make them feel,” he said. “Speak with respect. Use their names. Look them in the eye.”

But first, Jose believes all adults should challenge their own personal biases they may carry about young people, and always treat them as important, valued members of the community. “The voice and input of our youth need to be real and not just symbolic,” he said.

“You have to be willing and courageous to have the conversation.”

—Danielle Brown, Chicago Police Department

Sergeant Danielle Brown serves as a police officer in the 11th district on the West Side. Not only did she grow up in the community she now patrols; she is second-generation police. Her father was a detective. Sergeant Brown brings the human aspect to her role. She shows up – as a mother, sister, cousin – and treats her constituents as humans first. Everything starts with a conversation, she said, and being present for young people.

Sergeant Brown is focused on building relationships and opening the lines of communication, when things are going well for young people and when they need support or redirection. And just as she brings her full self to the role, she sees young people as multi-layered, not just their actions in the moment. She asks herself, are they safe at home? Are they valued? Do they have a safe space to go when they are not in school? How do we get them there?

Sergeant Brown leans on her fellow officers and department, as well as organizations and community members, to support young people in finding safe alternatives to violence. But it all starts with connection and conversation.

“You have to be willing and courageous to have the conversation [with a young person],” she said. “Meet people where they are. Give them a chance to get to know you. This is an opportunity to make change.”



“Small acts of presence communicate something powerful: you matter, you are supported, and you are not alone.”
—Kikanza Harris Scott, Illinois Network of Charter Schools

When Kikanza Harris Scott reflects on her experiences growing up she recognizes the impact that aunts and uncles, grandparents, neighbors, and friends of her parents had on her. “They reinforced what I grew up knowing as right from wrong, helped to keep me focused, and stepped in when my parents were working and couldn’t always be there,” Kikanza said. “In very small and sometimes even big ways, that village told me I was seen and I had value.”

With neighbors and grandparents nearby, ready to step in and show up without hesitation, Kikanza received the supervision, but also the encouragement and sense of belonging, that ultimately shaped how she supports young people today.

Several years ago, Kikanza met a high school student who earned a full-ride scholarship to college but felt conflicted. She was the first in her family to pursue higher education and did not have her family’s full support. Kikanza served as a sounding board for the student as she debated her decision. She listened and encouraged, just as her village had done for her throughout her adolescence. Now, that student is a working professional with a PhD in neuroscience.

“Violence prevention and community well-being often begin in these small, human moments,” Kikanza said. “Showing up doesn’t always require extraordinary resources or expertise. Sometimes it’s a conversation, words of encouragement, a ride home, or simply recognizing someone’s effort and potential. Small acts of presence communicate something powerful: you matter, you are supported, and you are not alone.”

“Be intentional to listen to more young people. To find out what is on their mind and ask what can we do to help.”

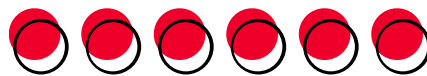
—Anthony Green

“Get your coffee. Every morning be present when kids are walking to and from school. You don’t have to talk to them, but you can be part of the safety net.”

—William Townsell, Chicago Police Department

because of one small shift...

At a high school on the South Side, staff, social workers, and community members became known for consistently showing up – walking students home after school, mediating conflicts, and checking in after traumatic events. While violence around the community continued, students described the school itself as one of the few places where adults knew them, noticed when they were struggling, and worked to keep them safe and connected.



David loves boxing, playing video games, and learning about history. A couple of years ago, though, David lost his older brother to gun violence, and this loss affected his behavior in school. He would get angry, yell, and was removed from class almost daily. Education nonprofit Communities In Schools of Chicago had an embedded support person in his school, Ms. Booker. She showed up consistently, helping David manage his anger and grief, practicing techniques with him like deep breathing, and discussing how he could shift his perspective. David not only improved his relationships with teachers; he stayed in class.

SHIFT #2:

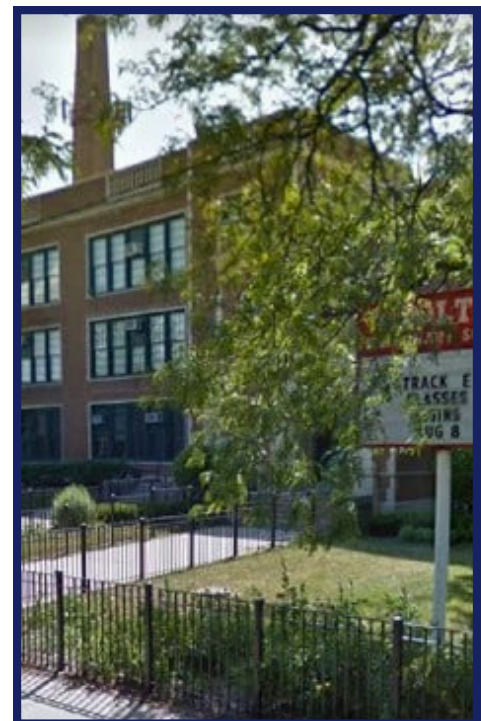
learn more about your community and its needs



Learn more about your community's most pressing, unmet needs. When people are in survival mode, they are at increased risk.

A person's basic needs (food, water, shelter, and sleep) and their safety needs (security and good health) must be met before a person can begin to focus on other needs, like connection, self-confidence, and self-actualization.

- Do some research.
- Engage with your neighborhood.
- Attend local events. Support community-based efforts.
- Consider what the family, in addition to the young person, may need.
- Support programs that uplift families and spaces before and after school where young people can feel safe and valued.
- Get informed – Understanding the root causes of violence and Chicago's history can help inform your participation in advocating, voting, and supporting policy changes.



“The resources are there. It’s finding how to tap into them.”

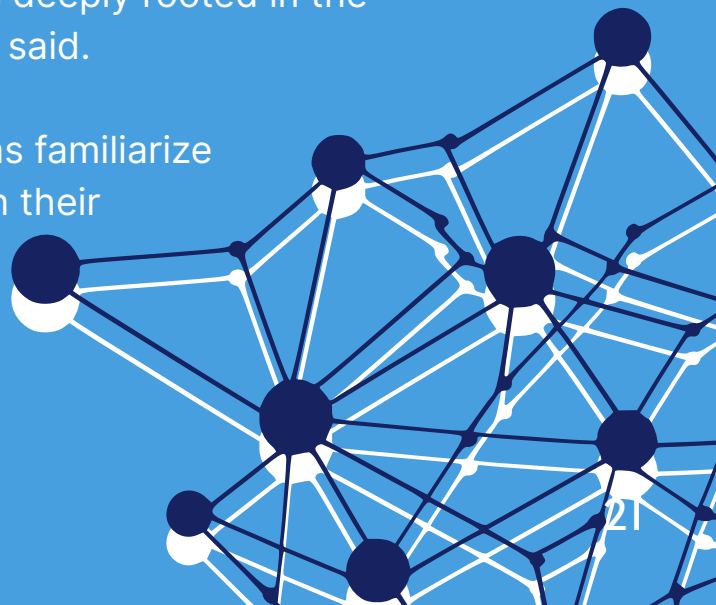
**—Dr. Halleh Akbarnia, Advocate Health Care
Emergency Medicine**

Dr. Akbarnia sees the effects of gun violence first-hand as a physician in the emergency medicine department. “I see the consequences of this repeatedly,” she wrote in a [2026 Chicago Tribune op-ed](#). “Patients who carried a gun believing it would protect them. Patients whose fate was shaped long before force was ever used. By the time they reach us, the conditions that determined what happened are already in place.”

As someone who works with victims of gun violence – and as someone who was personally affected by gun violence when she experienced open fire outside of the hospital one evening – Dr. Akbarnia has become an advocate for gun violence prevention. She advocates for evidence-based firearm injury prevention, serves on panels locally and nationally, and contributes to grassroots efforts focused on building stronger, safer communities.

“The resources [for gun violence prevention and reform] are there,” Dr. Akbarnia said. “It’s finding how to tap into them.” In a city like Chicago, organizations and violence interventionists deeply rooted in the communities they serve are abundant, she said.

Dr. Akbarnia believes that when Chicagoans familiarize themselves with work already happening in their neighborhoods and find ways to get involved, then they can contribute meaningfully to violence prevention and intervention efforts active across the city.



“Provide more love, compassion and understanding for students, parents, and teachers.”

—Ylonda Ware, Henderson Elementary

Ylonda Ware has served as the school counselor at Henderson Elementary in West Englewood for 18 years. In her role, she witnesses daily the effects that trauma and gun violence have on young people. She provides counseling services to students, always through a trauma-informed approach, and she connects her school with community programs and resources that address their specific needs.

Instead of focusing our efforts solely on school security or disciplinary actions like suspensions and expulsions, Ms. Ware said that schools need more caring adults – from their communities – who respond with emotional connection. “Many students don't feel seen or heard,” Ms. Ware said. “There is a profound lack of unconditional positive regard – the feeling that they are valued for who they are. Their value is often attached to grades, attendance, and behavior.”

Ms. Ware believes that if school leaders and teachers valued students for their characters, rather than their academic records, then school cultures would transform. Students would be better supported, teachers would be empowered to teach, rather than respond to behaviors, and school environments would be safer. It all begins with the school community – and having that community uplift student voices and reflect the neighborhoods they serve.

In a community school model, for example, schools could provide the community that young people need, Ms. Ware said. They could offer extended hours, trauma-informed clinical services, after-school recreation, and even adult education for parents. Outside of the school community, though, it all begins with how we treat each other, she said. “Everyone can provide more love, compassion, and understanding for students, parents, and teachers.”

“Incorporate programs that uplift the families.”

—Pat Day-McCray, A Pathway from Grief

Pat Day-McCray is a founder and CEO, public speaker, author, grief coach, and parent advocate. Her work is deeply rooted in lived experience, giving her a clear, personal understanding of both the challenges of parenting and the opportunities parents have to shape their children's futures.

“Children learn behaviors directly from what they see at home,” Pat explained. “We cook the way our parents cooked. We walk the way they walked. We speak the way they speak. It’s learned behavior.” When violence is used as a form of discipline, children may internalize that as a way to resolve conflict.

Through her work, Pat focuses on supporting parents as the foundation of prevention. She equips them to advocate for their children, develop emotional awareness, and build healthier ways to respond to life’s challenges. Her approach emphasizes non-violent discipline, emotional intelligence, and intentional parenting practices.

Pat’s work through A Pathway From Grief and PDM Journey Coaching centers on helping individuals and families move from emotional pain into clarity, growth, and meaningful change. By strengthening the parent, she believes we strengthen the family – and ultimately, the community.

“When parents are supported and equipped with the right tools, we begin to break cycles that have been passed down for generations. We replace them with understanding, communication, and healthier responses,” Pat said. “I believe everyone wants to feel loved, heard, and respected. We must advocate for parent-focused emotional support, remove judgment, encourage honest conversations at home, and incorporate programs that truly uplift families.”

“Contact [your local] school principal to see what needs they may have and how you can support them.”

—Kimberly Harshman, Together Chicago

“If everybody could just walk with one family for a year...”

—Jill Shannon, Safe Families for Children

“Schools need more experienced and diverse staff and faculty. Also, students need case management support and parental engagement. [Any Chicagoan can] advocate and vote.”

—Bradly Johnson, BUILD, Inc.

“First step, get informed and understand violence from more than just a surface level.”

—Alice Jordan, community advocate and Beat Meeting facilitator

“There are not enough after-school activities where kids can be safe and supported and engaged. Bring more programming to the school spaces. Contribute.”

—Elizabeth A. Rochford, 17th District Councilor

because of one small shift...

While volunteering with young people in juvenile detention, Chicago nonprofit leader Jahmal Cole realized many youth had rarely traveled beyond their own neighborhoods or been exposed to opportunities outside of the environments they grew up in.

In response, he founded My Block, My Hood, My City, an organization that connects young people to experiences, mentors, careers, and communities across Chicago. Through these experiences, students began building confidence, connection, and a broader sense of possibility for their futures. "Community safety begins with community building," he said.



At a high school in North Lawndale, students and staff were facing frequent fights and ongoing exposure to community violence. In response, the school launched a peer-led restorative justice and nonviolence program that trained students to mediate conflicts, build relationships, and interrupt violence before it escalated.

The impact was significant. Over several years, the number of fights at the school dropped dramatically – from roughly 90 fights per year to fewer than 15. Students involved in the program described feeling safer, more connected, and more responsible for protecting one another and their school community. "Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people."



SHIFT #3:

change your
mindset from
'it's not my
problem' to
'my actions
matter'



Safer communities require collective ownership, not just engagement from parents and teachers.

- See youth development as everyone's responsibility.
- Develop a sense of identity and connection to your own neighborhood and the children in your sphere of influence.
- Stand up for a young person, even when there's nothing in it for you. Seeing an adult use their voice, influence, or credibility on their behalf sends a powerful message: *You matter, and you're worth fighting for.*

did you know...

More than half of Chicagoans do not believe the city has a strong sense of community, which is integral to building safe spaces.

Community-building, and violence prevention, is on ALL of us. Our collective mindsent – and actions – matter.

“Sit in the discomfort. Don’t look away and assume someone else is handling it.”

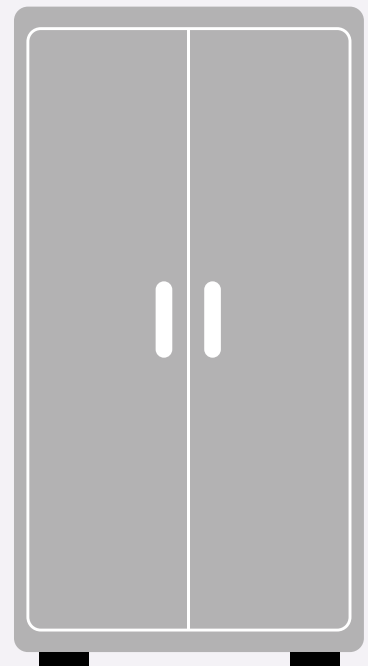
—Sara Airola, The Grace Network

In the depths of the pandemic, Sarah Airola and her husband started volunteering at vaccine pop-ups across Chicago schools. Her conversations with guidance counselors, teachers, and families there revealed that young people were in greater need of fundamental needs items, like health and hygiene items, first aid materials, and clothing.

Meeting their basic needs became Sarah’s priority. She launched The Grace Network to provide schools with care closets – and students and families with consistent access to these everyday resources.

Sarah’s work has underscored the impact of removing barriers, like hygiene insecurity, that keep young people from coming to school, and the realities of young people who have not had their basic needs met. They are in crisis, Sarah said, in fight or flight mode. And the decisions that people make when they are in fight or flight mode are impulsive and sometimes reckless.

“It’s really easy to look away [from what is happening in your community],” Sarah said. When she is meeting with Chicagoans, Sarah always encourages individuals to “think about what it would be like to have your everyday comforts taken away.” And then, take that reflection and empathy a step further – “don’t look away and assume someone else is handling it.” Instead, act. Do something in your community, however small, to make a positive impact on something you have noticed.



“See youth development as everyone’s responsibility.” —Vondale Singleton, CHAMPS Male Mentoring Program

Vondale Singleton was born and raised in Chicago. As a young person, he overcame personal challenges, including the death of his mother and imprisonment of his father, to stay in school.

A mentor empowered Vondale to attend college and earn his bachelor’s and master’s as a first-generation student. His experiences in education, and later as an assistant principal, inspired him to found an organization dedicated to male mentorship.

“Many students, especially boys and young men of color, do not have structured environments where their lived experiences, culture, and leadership potential are intentionally affirmed,” Vondale said. This lack of structure, representation, and affirmation creates a lack of safety, both physical and psychological. “Students ask themselves internally: Do I matter here? Does anyone know my story? Would anyone notice if I disappeared?”



Vondale believes that in order to create real change for youth, all adults, not just teachers and school staff, must “see youth development as everyone’s responsibility.”

When adults accept their role in helping create safe, supportive environments for young people, then they can engage deeper in the work by mentoring a young person, donating to a youth program, attending a youth event, encouraging youth, introducing them to career pathways, or even hiring a young person.

**“Don’t fall for the biggest lie: that our individual actions don’t matter; that the problems are too big to change; that it is a problem too far from your own.”
—Robin Koelsch, Communities In Schools of Chicago**

In 2025, the city witnessed the aftermath of an incident that occurred outside a South Side elementary school – a mother and her son were attacked by a group of young people on their way home from school. The incident was not only recorded; it was discussed and debated in the weeks that followed. After the attack, the questions started coming in. Why didn’t the school get involved? Where were the parents? How come the community didn’t step in when the violence began?

The responsibility for creating safe, supportive environments for young people falls on all of us, Robin said, not just parents, teachers, principals, or social workers. What continues to prevent us creating safe spaces is when our community members feel apathetic to the problem. “The gaps are in the shoulder shrugs,” Robin said, “the turning of the channel, the thought, ‘that’s too bad.’”

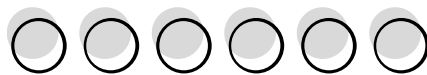
And the solutions are intersectional – policy changes, additional school and employment supports, simply a culture shift in seeing your neighbors’ struggles as your own. Robin’s work for Communities In Schools of Chicago, a nonprofit focused on helping students stay in school, focuses on building connections across school lines to organizations and individuals committed to student success. It allows her to see the power in communities coming together to support young people.

“Be curious,” Robin said. When we start to believe that one small action can truly make a difference, then we can begin to take the first steps in creating lasting and sustainable community change. “Who might see you or notice how you made them feel?” Robin asked. “What can you do to leave a space, an interaction, better than you found it?”

because of one small shift...

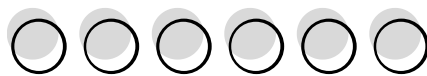
A middle school principal recalled a moment early in her career. After organizing a college visit for students who were often overlooked academically or behaviorally, another educator questioned why she would “waste time on those kids.”

The experience stayed with her and ultimately shaped the kind of school culture she would later build. Under her leadership, the school later ranked among the top-performing schools in the state for student growth, attendance, and school climate. “We’ve got to do it with love. It can’t just be academics.”



When a planned teen takeover was announced in Hyde Park, community members, parents, business owners, and educators responded by showing up. They walked the neighborhood, talked with young people, and created a visible adult presence focused on safety and connection.

The result was a powerful reminder that prevention often looks ordinary. The planned gathering did not escalate into the disruption many feared. Instead, young people encountered adults who were present, engaged, and invested in their wellbeing. “We just want to make sure that everybody is safe.”



SHIFT #4:

identify your network

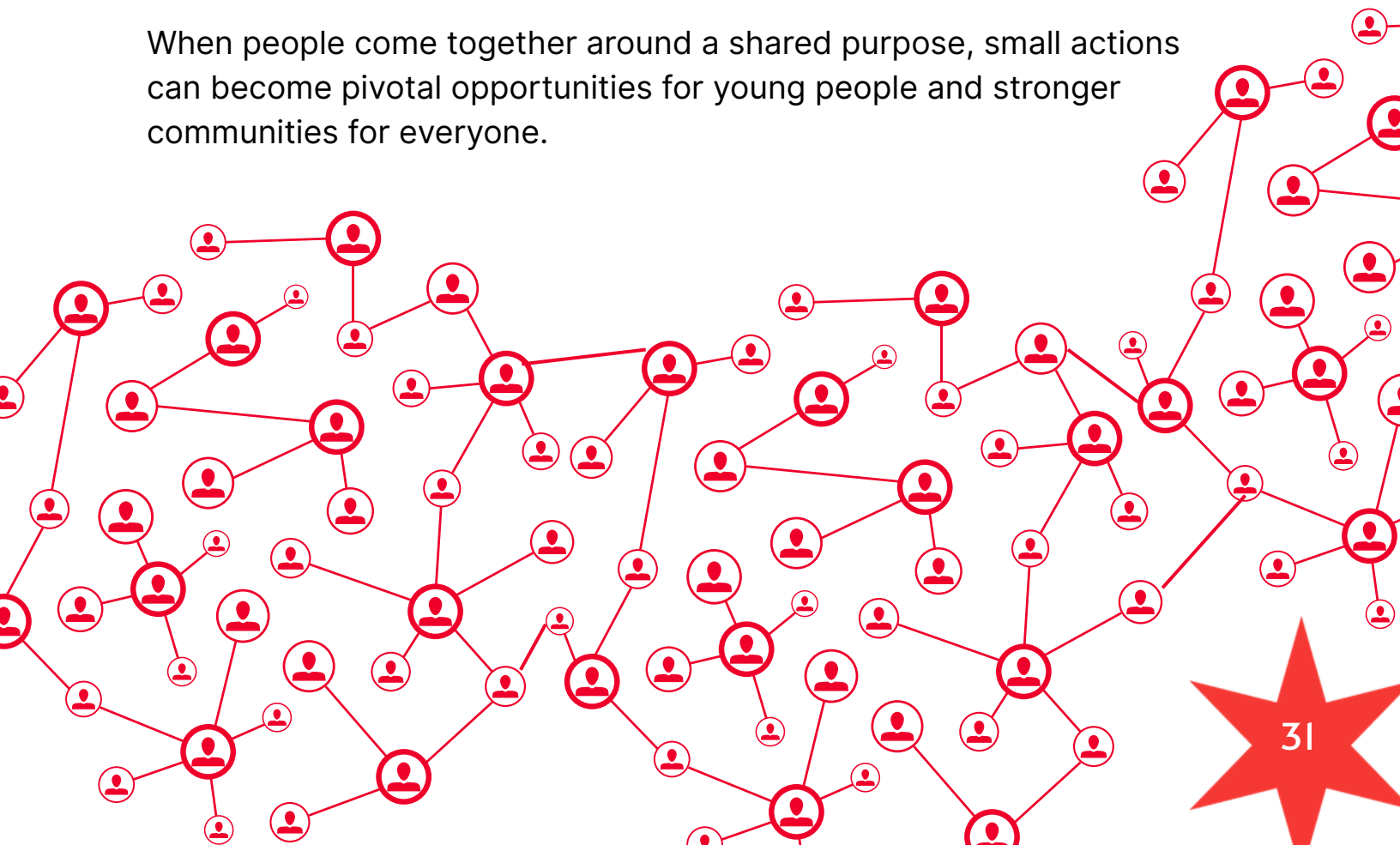


You don't have to do it alone.

Your network – friends, coworkers, neighbors, faith communities, or professional colleagues – can multiply your impact.

Everyone has something to offer: a skill, a connection, a few hours of their time, or simply a willingness to be present.

When people come together around a shared purpose, small actions can become pivotal opportunities for young people and stronger communities for everyone.



**“Everybody’s got time; everybody’s got talent.”
—Andrew DeMuro, Guitars Over Guns**

Andrew DeMuro leads curriculum and training design for Guitars Over Guns, shaping a national model that uses music and mentorship to drive youth development. He has witnessed the power of after-school programs that give young people a place to be, a skill to practice, and a caring adult to lean on.

In the after-school space, though, Andrew has seen many well-intentioned nonprofits compete for student enrollment. He believes that if there was more collaboration among organizations and targeted support on a student’s journey to and from school, the city would be better able to prevent youth violence.

“Everybody’s got time; everybody’s got talent,” Andrew said. “If you think to yourself, ‘Is there time I can give or a talent I have that could be useful to a young person?’ it puts you closer to real stories of real people who are doing good things across the city.”



Learn a kid’s name, Andrew said. Learn their hopes, dreams, fears, and worries. By building a relationship with one young person, even if it’s just with the kid who walks down your block on the way to school, we can create spaces where they feel wanted, supported, and connected – in the hours when they are in school and in the times in between.

“Find a space to serve (or be served) and stay consistent.”

—Jeffrey Shelby, New Life Covenant Church SE

Jeffrey Shelby works directly with young people as the senior director of children’s ministry. He knows first-hand how to effectively engage with and empower young people.

For him, Chicago school communities lack spaces where young people can build relationships with consistent, trusted adults – adults they can feel emotionally safe with, not just physically safe.

And this sense of safety must provide young people with purpose and belonging that extends beyond academics, Jeffrey said. “At the core, many young people are present in school, but they are not always fully seen, known, or valued,” he said.

If schools were able to offer students consistent mentorship, culturally responsive programs, and access to community resources, students would be better served – and our communities would be better served. “Find a space to serve (or be served) and stay consistent,” Jeffrey said.

Consistent programs that engage with community members, ones that develop young people’s sense of identity and purpose, are critical to violence prevention and intervention.



“Come together and create a strong network that can solve this issue.”

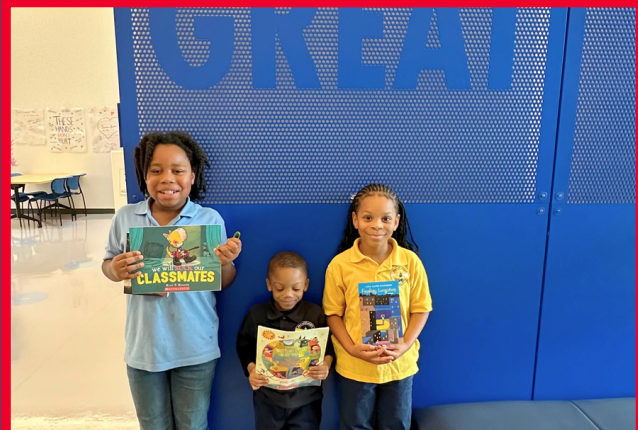
—Brittany Powell, Chicagoan, Parent, Professional

As a parent, Brittany believes that helping young people see a future for themselves is often overlooked. “A major challenge in education is that students frequently lack a clear understanding of why certain content matters and how it can be applied in real-world situations,” she explained.

When young people struggle to see how school connects to their lives, and future opportunities, it can become harder for them to stay engaged, motivated, or to come to school at all.

Brittany believes adults can create more opportunities for students to connect learning to life beyond the classroom. She points to career exploration, job shadowing, and hands-on experiences as ways to help young people imagine what is possible for themselves.

More broadly, she believes violence prevention and youth success require communities to work together. Her advice to fellow Chicagoans is simple: “Come together and create a strong network that can solve this issue.”



“By bringing greater awareness to the stories, culture, and significance of our neighborhoods especially through social media we can encourage youth to value these spaces and see themselves as part of Chicago’s future.”
—Katrina B., Chicagoan

because of one small shift...

Community member Craig Scott participated in a Mock Interview Day at Horizon Science Academy Belmont High School. The students were prepared and focused, and Craig was impressed with their thoughtful responses and their ability to turn their (short) life experiences into ambition.

“The short time I spent with them left such a big impression on me that I now want to invest some of my time giving back in these types of ways,” Craig said. “It’s remarkable how you can enter one way and leave inspired. I’m grateful to those students for shifting my perspective.”

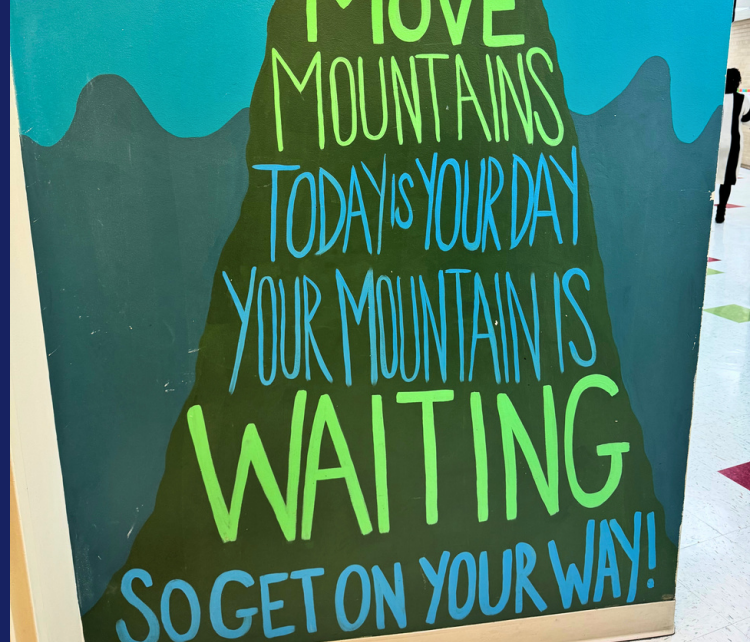


Kenny White and his colleagues presented two seminars on how to "Stop the Bleed" in front of 25 to 33 high risk youth. They weren't sure how the youth would respond as they live in a complex where the security booth window had been recently broken due to gunshots.

The youth were attentive and wanted to learn. The University of Chicago team not only showed lifesaving skills but strongly encouraged a pathway towards working in the medical industry.

SHIFT #5:

take the first step



Every meaningful change starts the same way: **someone takes the first step.**

You don't have to have the perfect plan, unlimited time, extra money, or specialized expertise. You simply have to be willing to begin.

Whether it's introducing yourself to a student, sharing your talents with a young person, tutoring, or just saying yes to an opportunity, the first step is often the hardest – and the most important.

The good news is that there isn't just one way to make a difference.

Some people mentor. Others coach, teach, advocate, create, donate, organize, or simply show up. Every person has "it."

The question isn't whether you have something to offer – it's where you'll begin.



“Pick the on-ramp that speaks to [you] the most.” —Tenny Ahn, Bank of America

Tenny Ahn’s business and banking experience spans more than three decades. His work now as Senior Vice President of Community Lending at Bank of America and his passion for organizations including My Brother’s Keeper and the Obama Foundation bridge the city’s business community with its nonprofit sector – and provide him with a unique perspective. “We have become rather complacent to the idea of school violence,” Tenny said. “We have to change that.”

And for Tenny, that change begins with culture. “Everything goes back to education,” Tenny said. “Making schools safe and functional is the foundation of societal change.”

Daily, students are experiencing the impacts of violence, he said, that affect how they enter the doors of the school building. Their educational experiences have a ripple effect on their ability to enter the workforce and the community prepared to succeed. He believes that if Chicagoans invested more intentionally in education and youth, our society would be able to create sustainable change.

“Pick the on-ramp that speaks to [you] the most,” Tenny said. When you can see a road map and different options for engaging in this work, then you are better able to contribute. The faith community, mentors, law enforcement, educators, advocates – every facet of society needs to join in changing the culture, process, and action, he said. There is power in the collective.

**“Any Chicagoan can be a mentor.”
—Damien Howard, Together Chicago**

“When a kid feels like they belong, it comes along with a safety, identity creation, and formation that’s able to happen and be heightened,” Damien said. And this feeling of belonging empowers students to have a sense of agency – to elevate their own voices and speak their truth about ills they are witnessing in their communities or even in their school buildings.

"Any Chicagoan can be a mentor," Damien said. They can share their skills. They can share their experience with their career or in their community. They can provide hope or encouragement. They can simply give their time, he said. Just one hour per week can have a tremendous impact on a young person.



“Share what you are good at. If you know how to tie a tie or iron a shirt, meet young people where they are and post a video.”

—William Townsell, Chicago Police Department

“Become actively engaged, volunteer.”

—Jennifer Ruffin, Business Services/Navigation Specialist

“Providing opportunities for real-world exposure, mentorship, and skill-building can make a meaningful difference in how students see their potential and future paths.”

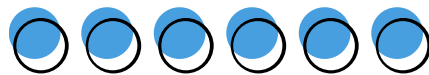
—Katrina B., Chicagoan



because of one small shift...

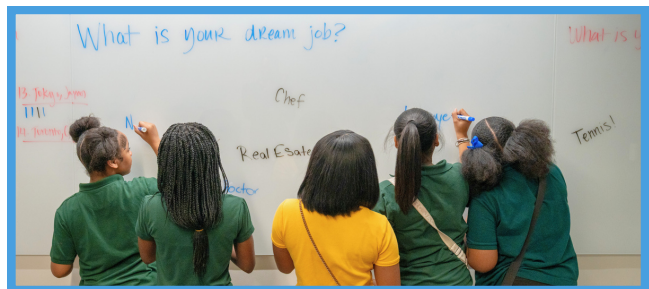
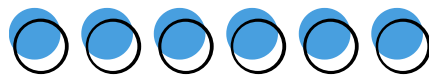
One afternoon, a teenager with a recent arrest record was running out of options. He needed a job to satisfy a probation requirement, but after repeated rejections, he was preparing to return to the streets and the same means of survival that had led to his arrest.

By chance, he walked into an after-school program and overheard the founder telling students they could earn money by participating. He decided to stay. Through the program, he discovered and developed his talent for writing, earned income legitimately, and built relationships with adults who believed in his potential.



Sixth grader Diana quit and rejoined Guitars Over Guns three separate times. What's the role of a caring adult when a young person struggles to commit? Be curious. Don't judge. Welcome them back with open arms, every time.

Diana thanked Guitars Over Guns Andrew DeMuro for not giving up on her during her 8th-grade Salutatorian speech. Through high school, she'd reach out again – first for support when her parents split, then for a recommendation as she applied for a Posse Scholarship to Oberlin College. Now, Diana is graduating with a degree in Social Work.





bottom line

Violence prevention in Chicago isn't just about policy. It's about people. Everyday actions – small shifts – done consistently and collectively create safer, stronger communities.

You can't self-care your way out of trauma, and you can't kindness a community out of violence, but you can make a difference.

what's your One Small Shift?



This report was created by the Violence Prevention Catalyst Team: Communities In Schools of Chicago, Together Chicago, Prismatic, Guitars Over Guns Organization, Henderson Elementary School, PDM Journey Coaching, Helix Education, Illinois Network of Charter Schools, Alice Jordan, BUILD Inc., The Grace Network, Jose Santiago, and Let Go-Be Great.

appendix



activity #1:

map your moments

Where and when do you already encounter young people? Most of us encounter young people more often than we realize, but we just pass right by. This activity helps you slow down and see the moments already in your day where connection is possible.

your day, mapped

Walk through a typical weekday. Mark every moment where a young person is present, even briefly.

MORNING: Commute, transit, walking

routine encounter

MID-DAY: Lunch spot, coffee shop, errand

opportunity

AFTERNOON: Work, building, parking, lobby

routine encounter

EVENING: Neighborhood, block, park, transit home

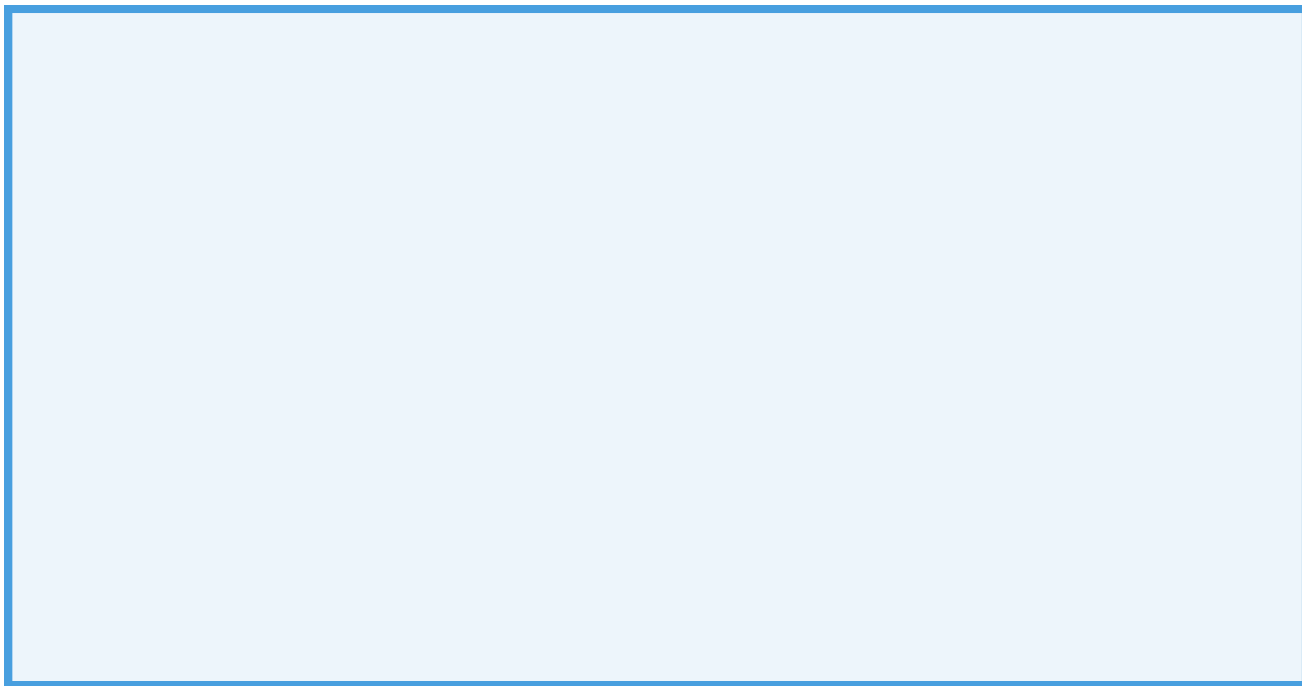
opportunity

YOUR ADD

write your moment

draw your map

Sketch your neighborhood, route, or workplace. Mark where young people appear with a circle O and where you could create a moment with a star ★



reflect on your map

Choose the questions that feel most alive for you. You don't have to answer all of them.

1. Which moment on your map do you usually pass through without making eye contact or saying anything?
2. When you do interact with a young person, what does it look like? What do you say or do?
3. What would it take to turn one routine moment into a real conversation – even 30 seconds?
4. Think of a time an adult made you feel seen as a young person. What did they do? How could you do that for someone else?

Talk it through with another adult

Compare your moments. Where do your paths overlap? What is one thing either of you could start doing differently – in a moment that already exists in your day?

My commitment

The one moment I will show up differently this week

activity #2:

unearth your perceptions

Before you can show up authentically for a young person, you have to get honest about what you're bringing with you. This worksheet guides you through three exercises to unearth unconscious bias, locate your starting point, and build the habit of reframing your first reaction.

first word, honest word

Write the very first word that comes to mind – no editing, no second-guessing.

When I see a group of teenagers on the street, I think...

When I hear about youth violence in Chicago, I feel...

When a young person seems disengaged or guarded, I assume...

Young people today are more _____ than when I was their age.

The kind of young person I feel most comfortable talking to looks like...

The kind of young person I tend to avoid or feel unsure around...

where do you land?

Mark an X somewhere on each spectrum to reflect your starting point. There are no right answers.

When I encounter a young person I don't know...

I feel wary or guarded.		I feel open and curious.
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When I think about youth in my neighborhood...

I see them as a problem to manage.		I see them as neighbors with potential.
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My personal comfort with mentoring or talking to youth...

I wouldn't know where to start.



I'm confident I can connect.

see the full person

Research shows that many acts of violence begin not with premeditation, but with disconnection and unmet needs. For each scenario, practice asking a different question.

The Scene

A group of young people is being loud on the train platform. Other riders are visibly uncomfortable.

What's your first reaction?

The Reframe

What might they be seeking? What do they need?

What could you do differently in this moment?

The Scene

A teenager near your office building is sitting on a stoop, alone, not in school.

What's your first reaction?

The Reframe

What might they be seeking? What do they need?

What could you do differently in this moment?

Talk it through with another adult

Share one thing from this exercise that surprised you. Don't explain it away, just name it. Then ask each other: Where do you think that perception came from? And what would it take to shift it?

My commitment

The perception I want to work against this month actively

activity #3:

find your 'One Small Shift'

Showing up for young people doesn't require a title or a program; it requires knowing what you have to offer and finding the place where it fits. Take stock of your time and talent, research what's already happening, and choose one concrete way to get involved.

reflect on your assets

My time

How much time could you realistically give per week or month? When are you most available?

My talent

What skills, career experience, or knowledge could you share? What do you know that a young person would benefit from?

My location

What neighborhood or part of the city are you most connected to? Where do you already spend your time?

My motivation

Why does this matter to you? What do you want a young person to feel after interacting with you?

your community research tracker

Research and document organizations and programs you find doing work you want to support. Ideas for ways to start include contacting your local school principal, searching My Chi My Future (mychimyfuture.org), or calling 211 for youth resources in your zip code.

Organization / program	What they do / contact	How I can help
		<i>mentor</i>
		<i>donate</i>
		<i>attend</i>
		<i>hire youth</i>
		<i>your idea</i>

your community's needs

What does your community need most? Check everything that resonates. This can help you narrow down where your contribution would have the most impact.

- ☐ More mentors and caring adults in schools
- ☐ Safe, welcoming after-school spaces
- ☐ Career exposure and workforce connections
- ☐ Basic needs support (hygiene, food, clothing)
- ☐ Mental health and trauma-informed support
- ☐ Family support programs for parents
- ☐ Youth programming (arts, music, sports)
- ☐ Policy advocacy and community voice

choose your small shift

You don't have to start big. Pick the entry point that matches your capacity right now – and stay consistent. Impact comes from showing up again and again.

	Opportunities	What it looks like	My pick
	1:1 mentoring	<i>Commit to one hour per week with one young person. Learn their name. Ask questions. Show up.</i>	☐
	Program support	<i>Volunteer with an existing youth organization. Bring a skill, tutor, coach, or just be a consistent presence.</i>	☐
	Career exposure	<i>Open your workplace. Host a visit, offer a job shadow, or hire a young person.</i>	☐
	Financial support	<i>Donate to a local youth program or advocate for your company to invest in youth initiatives.</i>	☐
	Advocacy	<i>Vote, attend community meetings, and speak up for policies that support youth safety and belonging.</i>	☐
	Everyday presence	<i>Say hello. Use their name. Acknowledge young people with dignity and genuine respect.</i>	☐

Talk it through with another adult

Pressure-test the commitment: Is it realistic? Is it consistent with what you said matters to you? Then ask: What would it look like to do this together? How will you check in with each other?

My action plan

Organization or program I will contact

My specific first step (and when I'll do it)

Who I'll bring with me or tell about this

How I'll know I'm making a difference

resources

Immediate Supports:

[211](#)

[988](#)

Youth Opportunities:

[Chicago Public Libraries](#)

[My CHI My Future](#)

[Chicago Park District](#)

School and Community Support:

[City of Chicago](#)

[Chicago Public Schools services](#)

[Illinois Department of Human Services](#)

sources

I. School Climate, Belonging, and Violence Reduction

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *School connectedness.*

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthy-youth/school-connectedness/index.htm>

Annotation: Foundational federal source demonstrating that students who feel connected to school are less likely to engage in violence and risky behaviors.

Aldridge, J. M., & McChesney, K. (2018). *The relationships between school climate and adolescent mental health and wellbeing: A systematic literature review.* International Journal of Educational Research, 88, 121–145.

https://dpg.unipd.it/sites/dpg.unipd.it/files/Aldridge%20%26%20McChesney_2018_School%20climate_F.pdf

Annotation: Comprehensive review linking positive school climate to improved mental health and reduced behavioral issues, including aggression.

Benbenishty, R., Astor, R. A., Roziner, I., & Wrabel, S. L. (2016). *Testing the causal links between school climate, school violence, and academic performance.*

<https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/benbenishty-et-al-2016-testing-the-causal-links-between-school-climate-school-violence-and-school-academic-performance.pdf>

Annotation: Demonstrates causal relationships – not just correlation – between school climate and reductions in school violence.

Cornell, D., & Huang, F. (2016). *Authoritative school climate and high school student risk behavior: A cross-sectional multi-level analysis.*

<https://cepa.stanford.edu/content/students%E2%80%99feelings-safety-exposure-violence-and-victimization-and-authoritative-school-climate>

Annotation: Shows that structured, supportive (“authoritative”) school environments are associated with lower levels of violence and victimization.

Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013). *A review of school climate research.* Review of Educational Research, 83(3), 357–385.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237043767_The_link_between_school_climate_and_violence_in_school_A_meta-analytic_review

Annotation: Meta-analytic evidence linking school climate to both academic outcomes and reduced violence; supports whole-school approaches.

American Institutes for Research. (n.d.). *Bullying prevention.*

<https://www.air.org/resource/spotlight/bullying-prevention>

Annotation: Highlights how school-wide climate and prevention strategies reduce both visible and “invisible” forms of violence (e.g., bullying).

Banerji, O. (2026, April 24). *"We've got to do it with love": How this Principal of the Year fosters belonging.* Education Week.
<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/weve-got-to-do-it-with-love-how-this-principal-of-the-year-fosters-belonging/2026/04>

Annotation: Highlights how belonging, trusted relationships, and supportive school environments contribute to student wellbeing, engagement, and resilience. Reinforces the role of school connectedness as a protective factor.

UI Health. (2025, April 29). *Community Partner Spotlight: My Block My Hood My City (M3).*
<https://uihealth.uic.edu/news-stories/community-partner-my-block-my-hood-my-city/>

Annotation: Highlights how trusted adults, mentorship, and access to new opportunities foster belonging, resilience, and positive youth development. Supports the role of connection and community engagement in violence prevention.

Glass, I. (Host). (2013, February 15). *Harper High School, Part One [Audio podcast episode].* This American Life/WBEZ Chicago.

<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/487/harper-high-school-part-one>

Annotation: Documents the experiences of students, staff, and community members at Harper High School on Chicago's South Side, illustrating the pervasive impact of community violence on young people and the critical role schools and supportive adults play in helping students navigate trauma and maintain hope.

Glass, I. (Host). (2013, February 22). *Harper High School, Part Two [Audio podcast episode].* This American Life/WBEZ Chicago.

<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/488/harper-high-school-part-two>

Annotation: Continues the story of Harper High School, highlighting how students, educators, counselors, and community members respond to violence and loss while working to foster resilience, connection, and opportunity for young people.

2. Student Safety, Exposure to Violence, and Behavioral Outcomes

Fisher, B. W., et al. (2018). *Students' feelings of safety, exposure to violence, and victimization.*
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6377176/>

Annotation: Links exposure to violence with decreased perceptions of safety and increased behavioral risk – reinforcing the importance of school environments.

Zullig, K. J., et al. (2010). *School climate and adolescent health behaviors.*
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3923723/>

Annotation: Demonstrates that positive school climate is associated with reduced risk behaviors, including aggression and violence.

PubMed. (2020). *School climate and violence-related outcomes.*

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32062424/>

Annotation: Peer-reviewed evidence connecting school climate improvements to measurable decreases in violence-related behaviors.

McLeod, S. (2026, February 6). Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Simply Psychology.

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

Annotation: Overview of Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation, outlining how unmet physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem needs affect human behavior and development. Particularly relevant to this white paper's discussion of violence prevention, belonging, and emotional safety, Maslow's framework helps explain how unmet basic and relational needs can impact emotional regulation, decision-making, and wellbeing.

Wall, C., & Ward, T. (2026, April 15). *Parents organize own gathering in response to planned 'teen takeover' in Hyde Park.* ABC7 Chicago.

<https://abc7chicago.com/post/teen-takeover-chicago-news-parents-organize-own-gathering-response-planned-hyde-park-trend/18886451/>

Annotation: Highlights a community-led response to a planned teen takeover in Hyde Park, with parents, educators, and local leaders engaging young people to promote safety and prevent violence. Illustrates the role of trusted adults, community connection, and collective responsibility in supporting youth.

3. Prosocial Behavior, Belonging, and Community Impact (“Pay It Forward”)

University of Texas at Austin. (2022). *Random acts of kindness make a bigger splash than expected.*

<https://news.utexas.edu/2022/08/18/random-acts-of-kindness-make-a-bigger-splash-than-expected/>

Annotation: Shows that small prosocial actions have outsized social impact, reinforcing the idea that individuals contribute to broader community safety.

Scientific American. (n.d.). *Kindness can have unexpectedly positive consequences.*

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/kindness-can-have-unexpectedly-positive-consequences/>

Annotation: Explains how kindness spreads behaviorally, influencing group norms and reducing harmful interactions.

Fowler, J. H., & Christakis, N. A. (2010). *Cooperative behavior cascades in human social networks.*

Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/03/100308151049.htm>

Annotation: Demonstrates that cooperation and positive behaviors spread through networks—supporting “pay it forward” frameworks.

Greater Good Science Center. (n.d.). *How kindness spreads in a community.*

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_kindness_spreads_in_a_community

Annotation: Synthesizes research showing that prosocial behavior creates ripple effects across communities.

University of Texas at Austin. (2020). *Cooperation can be contagious.*

<https://news.utexas.edu/2020/05/19/cooperation-can-be-contagious-particularly-when-people-see-the-benefit-for-others/>

Annotation: Reinforces that visible positive behavior increases likelihood of replication – key to community-level violence prevention.

ScienceDirect. (2019). *Prosocial behavior and social influence.*

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0022096519305831>

Annotation: Academic evidence linking prosocial norms with reduced antisocial behavior.

4. National Education Context

National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *The condition of education.*

<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/a01>

Annotation: Provides national context on student populations and systemic conditions shaping school environments.

5. Chicago Context: Violence, Youth, and Systems

A Better Chicago. (2026). *State of Our Youth 2026.*

https://www.abetterchicago.org/wp-content/uploads/ABC_StateOfOurYouth_2026-1.pdf

Annotation: Comprehensive, Chicago-specific analysis combining public data with youth voice.

Identifies violence exposure, mental health challenges, chronic absenteeism, and lack of safe spaces as interconnected drivers of youth outcomes. Notably, the report highlights that 23% of youth report witnessing violence weekly and emphasizes that school connection and community-based programs are key protective factors.

Kids First Chicago. (2026). *State of CPS: Student experiences and wellbeing.*

<https://www.kidsfirstchicago.org>

Annotation: Highlights ongoing challenges related to student wellbeing, belonging, chronic absenteeism, and emotional engagement within Chicago Public Schools. Student feedback emphasized the importance of trusted adult relationships, emotional safety, peer connection, and supportive school environments in shaping school engagement and overall wellbeing. The findings reinforce broader research connecting belonging and school connectedness to improved behavioral and mental health outcomes.

Chicago Sun-Times. (2026, January 13). *Mayor Brandon Johnson touts lower crime as community groups warn of funding risks.*

<https://chicago.suntimes.com/public-safety/2026/01/13/mayor-brandon-johnson-touts-lower-crime-community-orgs-say-lack-of-funding-jeopardizes-the-trend>

Annotation: Reinforces the role of community-based organizations in sustaining reductions in violence and highlights the fragility of progress without continued investment.

Chicago Tribune. (2026, April 9). *Chicago shootings data and trends.*

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/2026/04/09/chicago-shootings-2026/>

Annotation: Provides real-time local context on violence trends, grounding the white paper in current conditions.

Chicago CBS News. (2026, April 26). *Chicago Mayor Johnson signs executive order creating youth peacekeeping initiative.*

<https://www.cbsnews.com/chicago/news/chicago-mayor-johnson-executive-order-youth-peacekeeping-initiative/>

Annotation: Reports on the City of Chicago's creation of a youth-led peacekeeping program, investing in young people (ages 16–24) to mediate conflict and de-escalate violence among peers. The initiative reflects a shift toward relational, behaviorally informed, and community-based violence prevention strategies, aligning with research on peer influence and environmental factors in reducing violence.

MacArthur Foundation & The Harris Poll. (2021). *Reimagining public safety in Chicago.*

<https://www.macfound.org/press/article/the-harris-poll-reimagining-public-safety-in-chicago>

Annotation: Survey of Chicago-area residents examining perceptions of gun violence, policing, racial bias, and community trust. Particularly relevant to this white paper's framing around belonging and disconnection, the poll found that 53% of Chicagoans do not believe the city has a strong sense of community. The study also found broad agreement that gun violence reduction requires systemic and community-based reforms, not solely enforcement approaches.

The New Yorker. (2018, March 27). *Launching a national gun-control coalition, the Parkland teens meet Chicago's young activists.*

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/launching-a-national-gun-control-coalition-the-parkland-teens-meet-chicagos-young-activists>

Annotation: Highlights the experiences of Chicago youth affected by gun violence and their efforts to create change. Underscores the importance of youth voice, civic engagement, and community-based violence prevention.

Chicago Tribune. (2026, June 15). *What's driving Chicago's teen takeovers? Understanding the causes behind the gatherings.*

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/2026/06/15/chicago-teen-takeovers-causes/>

Annotation: Explores factors contributing to Chicago's recent teen takeovers, including social media, social isolation, and young people's desire for connection and belonging. Highlights the intersection of youth engagement, public safety, and community connection.

6. Behavioral Science, Environment, and Violence (“Unforgiving Places” Framework)

University of Chicago Crime Lab. (2025). *Unforgiving Places: The behavioral science of ending gun violence (event and research summary).*

<https://crimelab.uchicago.edu/2025/02/unforgiving-places-the-behavioral-science-of-ending-gun-violence/>

Annotation: Synthesizes the behavioral science framework underlying Ludwig’s work. Argues that traditional approaches fail because they assume rational decision-making, while in reality, violence is often driven by automatic responses, environmental cues, and social norms.

University of Chicago Booth School of Business. (2025). *Think Better: Jens Ludwig on behavioral science and gun violence.*

<https://www.chicagobooth.edu/research/roman/stories/think-better-with-jens-ludwig>

Annotation: Provides applied examples of how environment and social context shape behavior, including how young people in high-violence settings develop automatic defensive responses that can escalate conflict. Highlights interventions (e.g., cognitive behavioral programs) that reduce violent outcomes.

Brown Daily Herald. (2026, April). *UChicago professor Jens Ludwig argues gun control can be mitigated through behavioral training and improved public spaces.*

<https://www.browndailyherald.com/article/2026/04/uchicago-professor-jens-ludwig-argues-gun-control-can-be-mitigated-through-behavioral-training-improved-public-spaces>

Annotation: Accessible summary connecting Ludwig’s research to policy. Emphasizes that behavioral interventions and environmental design (“improved public spaces”) can reduce violence, even when broader structural issues persist.

Social Science Research Council. (2025). *Unforgiving Places: The unexpected origins of American gun violence (lecture summary).*

<https://www.ssrc.org/events/unforgiving-places-the-unexpected-origins-of-american-gun-violence/>

Annotation: Reinforces the central thesis that violence is often context-dependent and preventable, and that targeted interventions in specific moments and environments can significantly reduce harm.



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