Crime and Justice Policy Lab
UNIVERSITY *of* PENNSYLVANIA

Analyzing the Impact of
Baltimore's Group Violence Reduction Strategy in the Western District

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Executive Summary

The University of Pennsylvania's Crime and Justice Policy Lab (CJP) team is estimating the impact of the Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS) in the Baltimore Police Department's Western District – the area with the highest rates of homicides and shootings in Baltimore, and among the highest in the United States.

The team's preliminary estimates are that, in the 18 months after its introduction in January 2022, GVRS was responsible for reducing homicides and shootings in the Western District by roughly a quarter, and carjackings by about a third, with no evidence that these crimes moved to other parts of the city.

Importantly, despite the important role played by police in this intervention, the preliminary analysis does not detect an increase in overall arrests or those for minor offenses due to GVRS.

Introduction

Baltimore experienced more than 300 homicides and over 630 non-fatal shootings each year between 2015 and 2021. Of the city's nine police districts, the Western District (WD) has historically had the highest rates of violence. With less than 6% of Baltimore's population, the WD accounted for 16.2% of citywide homicides and non-fatal shootings between 2015 and 2021—more than any other district. The WD's homicide rate in 2021 was 178 per 100,000 residents—among the highest of any police district in the entire nation. When including non-fatal shootings, approximately 1 in 200 of the district's residents were shot or killed that year.

In January 2022, Baltimore City began implementing the Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS) in the WD. The strategy focuses on changing the behavior of groups actively engaged in conflict, who make up a small percentage of the district population but are connected to as much as 75% of its shootings and homicides. GVRS is a collaboration between community leaders, service providers, and law enforcement, including the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE), the Baltimore Police Department (BPD), the State's Attorney's Office (SAO), partner law enforcement agencies, Youth Advocate Programs, Inc.,

Roca, Inc. and community "moral voices" (people directly impacted by violence, survivors and family survivors, local pastors, long-standing residents, educators, mentors and other respected members of the neighborhood).

At a high level, GVRS involves three components: identification, notification, and action.

- Identification: Government partners diagnose gun violence dynamics in the WD on a weekly basis and identify individuals at imminent risk of harm. Groups and individuals responsible for carrying out community gun violence become the narrow focus of law enforcement.

- Notification: Individuals and groups directly connected to gun violence receive messaging from GVRS partners. This could involve individualized outreach from some combination of an officer, an outreach worker, and a community "moral voice," or could involve a group "call-in." The general message is: "we are concerned about your safety, we want to support you to keep you safe and out of jail, but the community cannot tolerate violence and there will be legal consequences if the violence continues."

- Action: Whenever eligible, notified individuals are connected to services and supports, ranging from intensive mentorship and crisis management to substance abuse treatment and transitional employment. Meanwhile, law enforcement partners maintain a consistent and narrow focus on those who continue to shoot and kill in order to stop violent victimization and hold offenders accountable.

The University of Pennsylvania's Crime and Justice Policy Lab team, in collaboration with Aaron Chalfin of the University of Pennsylvania and Max Kapustin of Cornell University, set out to measure the impact of GVRS on crime and enforcement activity in the WD.

Methodology

The analysis begins with records obtained from BPD covering reported crimes and arrests across Baltimore from January 2015 to June 2023. Our focus is on serious crimes against individuals that often involve firearms: homicides and shootings, assaults, robberies, and carjackings.

To measure the impact of GVRS in the WD, we must first estimate what reported crimes would have been in the WD had GVRS not been introduced. We do this by constructing a comparison group that is composed of other areas in Baltimore with crime trends similar to those of the WD. We then calculate how crime rates in the WD differed from what they *would have been* based on the comparison group in the 18 months after GVRS was introduced.

Results

In the 18 months after GVRS was implemented, there was a notable decline in homicides and shootings in the WD. Preliminary estimates suggest that GVRS reduced homicides and shootings in the WD by approximately a quarter, relative to what they would have been otherwise. The size and timing of this reduction make it highly likely to be caused by GVRS, with the beneficial impacts being greatest during the first year after launch and decreasing slightly afterward.

Homicide/shooting victims per 100K
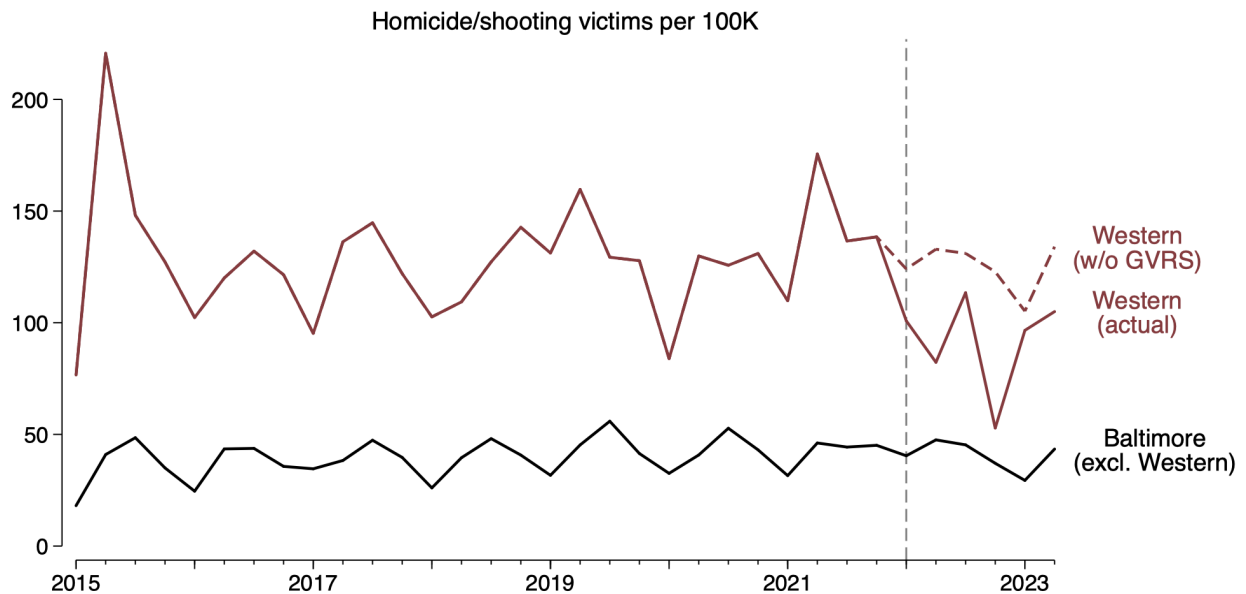
There is, thus far, little evidence of a broader change in assaults and robberies in the WD. However, carjackings—which tend to have a stronger connection to group member activity—declined by approximately a third, based on preliminary estimates.

As with any crime control initiative, a natural concern is that the strategy might reduce crime in the targeted area, only to push crime into other locations as suspects flee the attention of more focused law enforcement. We examined whether the crime reductions in the WD led to increased crime in neighboring areas or districts in Baltimore. Our preliminary findings indicate little evidence of crime displacement to neighboring areas—or other areas with pre-existing ties to the WD—suggesting that GVRS reduced crime in the WD without shifting crime problems to other areas in Baltimore.

Total arrests per 100K

Western (w/o GVRS)
Western (actual)
Baltimore (excl. Western)
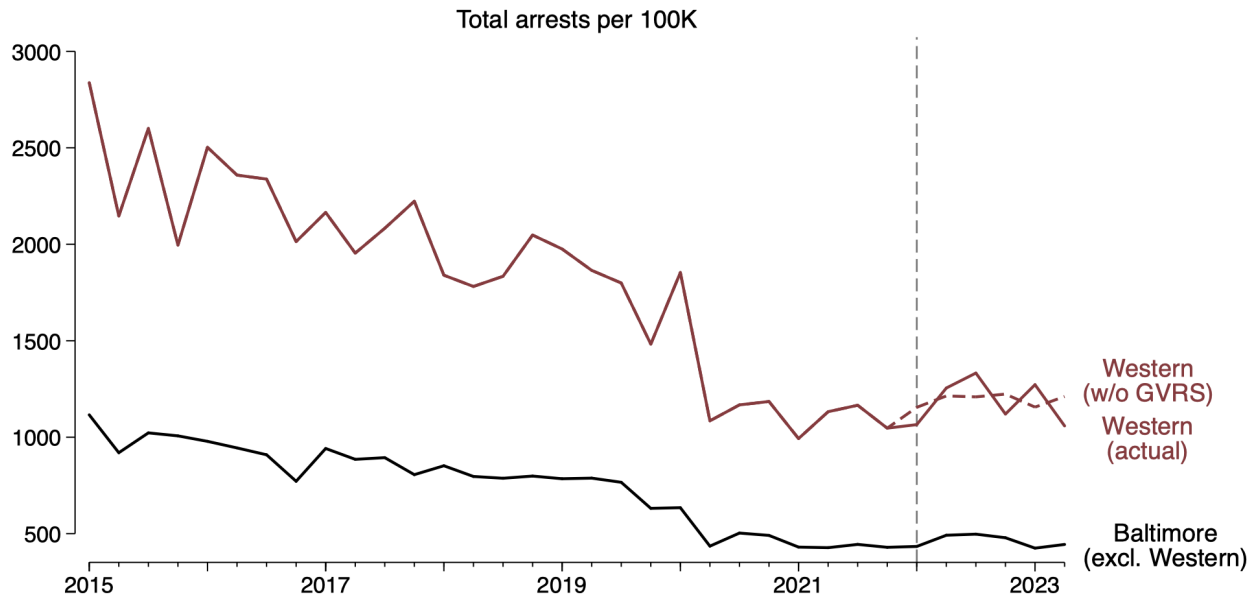
The report also examines changes in policing in the WD, relative to similar areas in Baltimore. While arrests have been declining substantially in Baltimore overall (and in the WD specifically) in the years preceding the launch of GVRS, our preliminary analysis suggests that the total number of arrests (as well as arrests for minor offenses, such as disorderly conduct or drug possession) have followed similar trajectories in the WD and other comparable areas of Baltimore in the 18 months since the launch of GVRS. This suggests that while approximately 140 individuals were arrested by BPD's Group Violence Unit (GVU) in the WD, the intervention did not lead to a broad increase in the number of arrests in the WD.

Conclusion

Strategies like GVRS have proven effective at reducing gun violence, while also minimizing the overall number of arrests. This focused approach centers on groups and individuals at high risk of involvement in gun violence. It connects them to life-saving services and supports, while also deterring future violence by narrowly focusing enforcement attention on those who continue to engage in violence.

Effective leadership and comprehensive program implementation are crucial to achieving positive outcomes. The collaboration between law enforcement, community-based organizations, and social services plays a key role in this success. However, expanding such programs to other districts poses challenges, including staffing shortages within the police department. Regardless, the potential benefits in terms of public safety underscore the need for further investment and continued focus from government leaders.

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The early findings of this study underscore the potential of GVRS and similar strategies to reduce gun violence, while avoiding the collateral consequences of mass arrests. These programs demonstrate the power of targeted interventions in addressing persistent issues of violence in urban communities. As policymakers and communities grapple with the complex issue of gun violence, these insights can guide evidence-based decisions that prioritize both public safety and fiscal responsibility.

Future analyses will explore different aspects of the intervention, including GVRS's individual-level impact—whether those exposed either through enforcement or services (and their peers) experienced changes in behavior—as well as its cost-effectiveness.

Acknowledgements