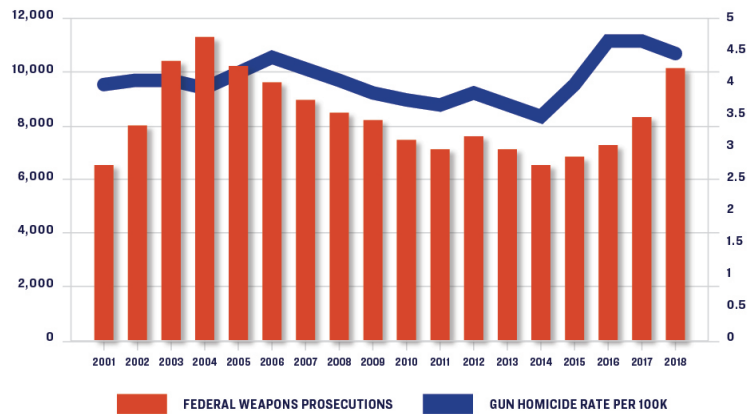


# AMERICA AT A CROSSROADS: REIMAGINING FEDERAL FUNDING TO END COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

For decades, our nation has failed to adequately address the gun violence that plagues underserved communities in our cities. Federal funding for violent crime prevention has been insufficient, unfocused, and sometimes harmful, contributing to the mass incarceration that has hollowed out communities of color while failing to significantly decrease homicides.

As a country and as a gun violence prevention movement, we must reckon with the fact that **for decades, we have overwhelmingly pursued the wrong strategies and tactics**, locking up scores of young men of color while simultaneously failing to protect the most vulnerable members of our society from gun violence.

## TWO DECADES OF MISPLACED PRIORITIES



Yet in the midst of these missteps and missed opportunities, there’s still hope. Each of the major federal funding streams explored in this report—the Victims of Crime Act, the Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant, and Project Safe Neighborhoods—can be and has been used to fund evidence-informed, community-based violence prevention strategies that actually work. In this report, we examine each program in detail and identify ways for advocates to help better leverage these existing opportunities. We also recommend structural reforms to improve each program. **Finally, we propose an overhaul to the federal system, centered on the creation of an Office on Community Violence that is modeled after the Office on Violence Against Women.**

Our government has a mandate to protect its citizens, including and especially from a devastating epidemic perpetuated by corporate special interests like the gun lobby. We refuse to accept these deaths as inevitable, or to write off any American because of the color of their skin or their zip code. Our leaders can and must do better, and we will do everything in our power to hold them accountable until they do.

# VICTIMS OF CRIME ACT

Funding from the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) covers both the state victim compensation and state assistance programs. While victim compensation is given directly to individual crime survivors, assistance grants are awarded to organizations that serve survivors of crime. **In contrast to the onerous individual qualifications for victim's compensation programs, assistance grants only require that individuals receiving services have been victims of crime.** There is a powerful relationship between violent victimization and future violence, and strategies that serve victims of violent crime have been shown to improve public safety by helping to break this cycle.

<b>ENACTED:</b>	1984
<b>SIZE:</b>	Balance of \$6 billion in 2020, with an annual spending cap of \$2.3 billion
<b>HOW IT'S FUNDED:</b>	The Crime Victims Fund, funded by payments from corporations and individuals convicted of breaking federal law. Congress sets a spending cap each year.
<b>HOW IT'S ADMINISTERED:</b>	The Office for Victims of Crime, which sits within the Department of Justice, awards VOCA assistance grants to states at a baseline of \$500,000, which is then adjusted significantly based on population. State administering agencies (SAAs) designated by each state's governor distribute VOCA assistance grants to local organizations and agencies.
<b>CHALLENGES:</b>	From 1993 to 2009, <b>only nine percent of victims of serious violent crime received compensation from a victim services agency.</b> Applicants tend to be female, white, and between the ages of 25 and 59, which is not aligned with demographic data about victims of violent crime, who are overwhelming young men of color.
<b>UNTAPPED OPPORTUNITIES:</b>	Many states have been leaving VOCA money on the table. SAAs have tremendous discretion over how to use VOCA funds, and should use them to fund evidence-informed violence intervention strategies that directly support victims of violent crime. In 2019, VOCA assistance funds were used to fund promising hospital-based violence intervention programs in New Jersey and Virginia.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVOCATES:

1. Raise awareness and build capacity to leverage VOCA for community violence work
2. Identify and build relationships with state administering agencies
3. Make the case to state administering agencies with data, evidence, and anecdotes

## REFORMING VOCA AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL:

1. Protect the long-term sustainability of the Crime Victims Fund
2. Increase the percentage of VOCA funding earmarked for underserved victims of crime
3. Clarify that VOCA assistance funds may be used to support crime prevention

# EDWARD BYRNE MEMORIAL JUSTICE ASSISTANCE GRANT PROGRAM (BYRNE JAG)

Byrne JAG is a criminal justice-oriented grant program that has several crime fighting purposes laid out by Congress, including: (1) prevention and education, (2) drug treatment and enforcement, (3) crime victim and witness programs, and (4) mental health programs, including behavioral programs and crisis intervention teams. Given these broad purpose areas, **there is ample room for Byrne JAG to shift away from the enforcement of low-level drug crime** and instead fund evidence-informed strategies to address violence in genuine partnership with community organizations.

<b>ENACTED:</b>	2005
<b>SIZE:</b>	\$263.8 million as of FY2019
<b>HOW IT'S FUNDED:</b>	Hundreds of millions of dollars, annually: \$263.8 million as of FY2019
<b>HOW IT'S ADMINISTERED:</b>	Byrne JAG is administered by the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance. The governor of each state designates a state administering agency to both apply for and administer Byrne JAG funding. Each year, the Bureau of Justice Assistance releases a Byrne JAG solicitation to which eligible state and local units of government respond.
<b>CHALLENGES:</b>	Nearly 65% of Byrne JAG funds have been used to support law enforcement and corrections functions, with an emphasis on increasing arrest rates for lower level offenses, while only 6% of funds are directed to crime prevention programs. <b>Byrne JAG funds also are not flowing to strategies backed by strong evidence</b> , and as a result, major indicators of public safety—like the national homicide rate—have not improved significantly since the early 2000s.
<b>UNTAPPED OPPORTUNITIES:</b>	Subrecipients may include community-based organizations that work to improve public safety. New York, Virginia, and California are among the few states that have directed Byrne JAG funding to evidence-informed, community-based crime reduction programs. fund promising hospital-based violence intervention programs in New Jersey and Virginia.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVOCATES:

1. Use Byrne JAG funds to support evidence-informed crime prevention strategies
2. Focus advocacy efforts on state administering agencies and local recipients
3. Ensure community voices are at the table and able to meaningfully engage

## REFORMING BYRNE JAG AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL:

1. Require significant investment in strategies other than crime suppression
2. Require community input and implementation partnership
3. Improve accountability and remove politically motivated funding conditions

# PROJECT SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS (PSN)

PSN was created by President George W. Bush with the goal of reducing gun violence across the nation. The program has mostly been used to massively increase federal prosecution for individuals found in illegal possession of a firearm rather than those who have actually committed an act of violence. As a result, **PSN has exacerbated mass incarceration without contributing meaningfully to public safety** and is in major need of reform.

<b>ENACTED:</b>	2001
<b>SIZE:</b>	\$20 million annually as of 2020
<b>HOW IT'S FUNDED:</b>	Congressional appropriation
<b>HOW IT'S ADMINISTERED:</b>	PSN is administered by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, an office within the Department of Justice. Each of the country's 94 federal judicial districts is eligible to apply for PSN awards based on a formula that takes into account population and violent crime rate. Each US attorney is responsible for assembling a PSN team that works with a fiscal agent to decide how subawards should be issued.
<b>CHALLENGES:</b>	Four years after PSN was initiated, federal prosecutions and convictions for weapons charges had doubled—with no corresponding decrease in national gun homicide rates. <b>Resources have not been focused on the locations most likely to experience high rates of homicide</b> , nor have these programs been held accountable through rigorous evaluation of outcome data.
<b>UNTAPPED OPPORTUNITIES:</b>	While PSN has been used to fund promising strategies like group violence intervention in cities like Oakland, California, it's mostly been used to fund harmful strategies like Project Exile that emphasize driving up weapons-related convictions and prosecutions, regardless of whether these weapons have been used to commit violence. PSN should be used to fund more community-based organizations that are implementing public health strategies to reduce violence.

## REFORMING PSN AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL:

1. De-emphasize prosecution of gun possession offenses and focus PSN on highest-risk individuals
2. Focus on jurisdictions with the highest levels of gun homicide
3. Prioritize evidence-informed violence prevention and intervention strategies
4. Meaningfully engage the community and service providers as partners

# OFFICE ON COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

Decades of research have shown that successful violence prevention strategies have four elements in common:

- FOCUSED:** Solutions must be focused—both on the strategies most likely to have the largest impact in the shortest period of time, and also on the geographical areas experiencing high rates of violence.
- BALANCED:** The most effective violence reduction strategies use a blend of community-centric prevention and intervention strategies and focused law enforcement efforts, with genuine partnership between community stakeholders and law enforcement.
- ACCOUNTABLE:** Programs must use concrete performance metrics and have data collection processes in place to hold themselves accountable for producing results.
- ROBUST:** Successful programs require significant and sustained resources over a period of years. A program in place for only a year or two is not robust, nor is a strategy that tries to address community violence by simply redirecting existing resources.

In their current forms, VOCA, Byrne JAG, and PSN fail to hit all of these metrics. **The federal government should act to reform these funding streams in the ways described throughout the report**, and in the meantime, advocates should do everything they can to direct these funds to evidence-based strategies.

	VOCA	BYRNE JAG	PSN
FOCUSED			X
BALANCED			
ACCOUNTABLE	X		
ROBUST	X	X	

In order to best coordinate America’s response to community violence, we recommend the creation of a federal Office on Community Violence, modeled after the Office on Violence Against Women (funded at more than \$530 million annually over the past few years).

**We recommend establishing a similarly funded Office on Community Violence to serve three core functions:**

- 1) direct federal grants to localities disproportionately impacted by community violence
- 2) build the country’s technical assistance capacity
- 3) set a research agenda for the community violence field and help disseminate best practices

Too many lives are on the line for our country to continue to miss and mismanage opportunities to end community violence. We hope that the recommendations contained within this report comprise a helpful roadmap for the new administration and advocates around the country dedicated to putting a stop to the scourge of community violence.