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Youth shootings in Milwaukee are persistent, but preventable. Here are the people working to stop them.

Cleo Krejci and David Clarey Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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We know how many children and teens are shot and killed in Milwaukee each year.

What's much harder to measure is the number of shootings that have been averted.

Throughout Milwaukee, parents, advocates, educators and others are working to stop the violence.

The volume of shootings of youth in Milwaukee shows why. Among city's largest community of youth, Milwaukee Public Schools, [23 students were shot and killed](#) between June 2024 and 2025, all outside of school. That's enough to fill a classroom.

Advocates agree more needs to be done. But they also have a good idea of what is already working.

Here are some programs underway in Milwaukee, plus more ideas for solutions.

Merging entrepreneurship and a pro-style youth basketball league

In 2008, Nigel Harvey's best friend was murdered.

"I promised his mother one way I was going to do something to combat it, to put an end to gun violence," Harvey said. "Instead of being vengeful, I thought that I would come with a solution."

He founded [Cream Skills Inc.](#) in 2016, a free, co-ed, youth summer basketball league. It's a "microcosm of the NBA," complete with a lottery and draft. More than 1,000 young people have participated.

Players take one class per week at his alma matter, Milwaukee Area Technical College, learning skills like financial literacy, entrepreneurship and health and wellness.

Harvey said the league gives people a safe space in the summer and helps prevent violence by giving young people business skills they can invest in their communities.

"Imagine if this is your cousin's dad's business right here. Your friend's mom's business right here. You're going to respect it, you're going to patronize it, you're going to kind of protect it," he said.

Training youth on peer mediation

Twelve-year-old Serenity Jones recently learned that, if she gets upset, she can leave the room and practice breath work to calm down.

She's part of Junior Violence Interrupters, a program that teaches conflict resolution and peer mediation skills to young people in the interest of reducing fighting and school discipline issues.

It's the work of [Minister Caliph Muab-El](#) of [Breaking Barriers Mentoring Inc.](#), and adapted from the nationally recognized Chicago-based Violence Interrupters program.

"If you're mad, you tend to do stuff you'll regret later because it is so in the moment," Serenity [told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel in July](#). "Breathing is better."

Ending cycles of retaliation through paid fellowships

Andre Robinson sees a pattern among homicides in Milwaukee.

"Most of them, it sprang from a conflict that ended up in one person getting shot, and then the rival saying, "OK, you shot him, so I'm going to shoot somebody from your clique, if not you," he said.

Of the four programs Robinson oversees at [Milwaukee Community Crossroads](#), one focuses directly on breaking that retaliatory cycle. It's called [Advance Peace](#), and it offers fellowships to people involved in gun violence, including those who have already fired guns at others.

It's an intensive program for the nearly 30 people chosen to participate. They have to check in with a mentor three times a day, participate in discussions with community elders, and

travel to places outside of Milwaukee. In return, the program provides a monthly stipend.

Robinson hopes the program, which started in 2024 in Milwaukee, will have ripple effects.

Of the first class of fellows, half no longer carry a gun.

"If they can see that this person last year (was) responsible for at least 10 shootings that they know about, and now this person is no longer carrying a gun, and is an upstanding member of society, somebody's going to say, 'Well, what did he do? How did he get there?'" Robinson said.

Bringing hope to tragedy and investing in a citywide arts curriculum

The volunteer musicians of the [Black String Triage Ensemble](#) describe themselves as "spiritual and emotional medics" who show up in the immediate aftermath of a shooting to perform compositions designed to foster hope.

Music literally rewires the brain, said founder Dayvin Hallmon — but it's rarely used as a tool to help communities heal from violence.

"Whatever it is that life in the hood, and life in the city, rips apart inside you, we know what to do to put it back together," Hallmon said.

Too few kids have access to music education, Hallmon said. He wants to see a mandatory citywide arts curriculum.

He's calling on people to not only recognize the problem of gun violence, but to also ask what they can do about it.

"If you stand there and say 'This is not who we are,' then you are part of the problem," Hallmon said. "Say this is who we are, but say, 'This is not who we're gonna be.'"

Providing a full system of support, from monitoring grades to social media

On any given day, Chaz Fortune and his team of youth mentors might knock on a family's door, check in on someone at work, or monitor conflicts on social media. They watch teenagers' school attendance and grades, and help them learn to regulate their anger.

Fortune is part the county's [Credible Messengers](#) program, which serves people ages 12 to 22 who are involved in the youth justice system or at risk.

The goal is to get a holistic view of the situations youth face that can drive violence, and provide support at every turn.

"We're talking to the people in their lives who are trying to help them become great," Fortune said.

A recent review found [76% of Credible Messengers' 199 participants in 2024 had no referrals](#) to the youth justice system.

Building trust with middle and high school students

The Medical College of Wisconsin's violence prevention group, [414Life](#), is known for responding to the scenes of shootings or other violence and helping mediate tense discussions.

Since 2021, it has also operated a program for Milwaukee middle and high school students who have been suspended, expelled or faced other discipline at school. So far, that program has worked with 260 students, in six to nine schools at a time.

Each week, a group of students participates in a discussion covering topics like conflict resolution, violence and gangs.

The goal is to have a "real talk" with those students, said program director Lynn Lewis, and to build trust and rapport.

"They respect that," she said.

Honoring those lost to gun violence

Advocates say it's important for victims of gun violence to be remembered.

[Debra Gillispie](#) founded Mothers Against Gun Violence after her son was shot and killed in 2004. She helped start a bus mural program featuring portraits of people affected by gun violence. By scanning a QR code under the portraits, people can hear a short audio story about each person.

"Each story is unique, and they're always powerful," Gillispie told the Journal Sentinel in 2022.

Her work continues years later in other ways, like when she and two Carroll University researchers went to a middle school to talk with youth about gun violence.

There, she saw how important it is to get youth to trust adults. It wasn't until they promised the information wouldn't be shared elsewhere that the kids began to open up. Their issues ranged from housing to truancy and family issues.

It's given Gillispie insight on the importance of intervening in kids' lives in specific ways and early on, from the moment a possible red flag appears.

"We need to find out what's going with the youth. We need to invest in them," Gillispie said.

Giving kids the space to just be kids

Every day at [Camp Rise](#), about 300 kids share breakfast with teachers, principals and counselors from Milwaukee Public Schools and MKE Rec who staff the summer program as counselors.

The summer camp for 10- to 13-year-olds focuses on career exploration, not necessarily violence prevention itself.

The breakfast is a chance for adults to talk and laugh with the kids, and "to open up their eyes and ambitions about whatever we're about to do for the day," director Romell Greer said.

Kids in Milwaukee are often pushed into adulthood early by exposure to shootings and other issues at home or in their neighborhoods. One goal at Camp Rise is for "kids to be kids," Greer said, and to connect them with trusted adults.

"Just letting them know, 'There's other people out there that care about you, and I want to be one of them,'" Greer said.

The waitlist topped 950 this summer, Greer said.

Intervening — immediately — after violence

Many advocates agree: Violence begets violence.

That's why, when someone arrives in the hospital after a shooting, stabbing or other violent incident, volunteers from [Project Ujima](#) arrive. The goal is to prevent future harm by connecting the victim, and their family or guardians, to whatever support they need.

That might be safety planning, access to basic resources or mental health support.

Children's Wisconsin operates the program. Bridget Clementi, the hospital's vice president of community health, said car accidents were the leading cause of injury and death for kids when she started her career. Now [it's gunfire](#).

"Many believe that this is a political issue, and it's actually an issue about people," Clementi said.

Transforming vacant lots in 52306 to green spaces

One indirect way to combat violence is by investing in neighborhoods.

We Got This, a local nonprofit, pays young people to transform vacant lots in Milwaukee into gardens. Their work is centered in 53206, where there are over 800 vacant lots.

"A lot of community members give up hope, don't have hope. But I think this restores hope," We Got This board member [Shawn Jenkins said in an interview last month](#). "We want to give a new image to our ZIP code. We want to show that 53206 can be a great place."

Addressing social determinants of health

The risk factors for gun violence are plenty, and well-documented.

Data shows young people who are absent from school, are disciplined at school, and switch schools often are more at risk. Another major risk factor is easy access to guns, mirroring what Milwaukee officials have long said.

Reggie Moore, director of violence prevention policy and engagement with the Medical College of Wisconsin, said efforts focused on reducing violence in Milwaukee need to reach people earlier.

"We shouldn't wait for a young person to experience trauma, or cause harm, to provide them the resources and the supports that they need to thrive," he said.

Moore suggests focusing on the social determinants of health — providing stable housing and a strong education, for instance — in addition to intervention work.

"I think really being intentional around, how do we set young people up for success?" he said.

Encouraging the use of gun locks

City officials have long encouraged people to better secure their firearms.

All Milwaukee Fire Department stations and health centers run by the Milwaukee Health Department hand out free gun locks. Directories for [fire stations](#) and [health centers](#) are available online.

In addition, these groups also provide gun locks:

[United Neighborhood Center of Milwaukee](#), 1609 W. North Ave.

[City on a Hill](#), 2224 W. Kilbourn Ave., during outreach events on the second Saturday of each month.

[Milwaukee Christian Center](#), 807 S. 14th St., at its food pantry, which operates Monday through Thursday, from 1 to 3 p.m.

[Neighborhood House of Milwaukee](#), 2819 W. Richardson Place.

[Neu-Life Community Development](#), 2014 W. North Ave.

[Silver Spring Neighborhood Center](#), 5460 N. 64th St.

[COA Youth and Family Centers](#), 909 E. Garfield Ave. and 2320 W. Burleigh St.

[Northcott Neighborhood House](#), 2460 N. Sixth St.

[Journey House](#), 2110 W. Scott St.

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