

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY JUNE 2024

# Mitigating the Academic Impacts of Proximity to Homicide

## The Role of Schools



David W. Johnson, Rebecca Hinze-Pifer, David Orta, and Samantha Guz

# Executive Summary

Community violence can have traumatic effects on young people, presenting daunting challenges for families and school educators working to support students' growth, development, and achievement in school. It is critical to understand its effects on students and consider what schools can do to mitigate those effects, while working to reduce the prevalence of homicide and gun violence in the broader society.

This mixed methods study asked:

- 1. What is the extent, distribution, and impact of living in close geographical proximity to violence\* on CPS students' performance in schools?**
  - How do proximity to violence and its impacts on young people vary geographically and for particular groups of students, specifically students of color and those living in communities with high levels of poverty?
- 2. To what extent is there evidence whether schools can insulate or protect students from the negative effects on academic and behavioral outcomes of living in close proximity to violence, so as to support students' health and wellness?**
- 3. What elements of school climate and organization are characteristic of schools that appear to protect students against the negative impacts of proximity to violence on academic and behavioral outcomes?**
- 4. How do adults working in schools that mitigate the impact of living in close proximity to violence understand and describe their work?**

\*This study specifically looked at the effects of homicide because reports of homicide are least affected by reporting bias, and homicide rates are highly correlated with other forms of community violence.

## Key Findings

- **The experience of living in close geographical proximity to homicide varied considerably for students across Chicago.**
  - Between 2011 and 2019, on average, one in five CPS students lived within 0.2 miles—roughly two city blocks—of the location of a homicide in any given year. Six percent of students had this experience multiple times in a single year.
  - Students living in Chicago's lowest income neighborhoods were the most likely to live in proximity to homicide.
  - Black students were more likely to live in proximity to homicide than their peers—but at the same time, many schools that served predominantly Black students had relatively low levels of student proximity to homicide.
- **Living in close geographical proximity to homicide negatively affected students' academic performance.** Students who lived in close proximity to homicide had, on average, lower attendance rates, lower standardized test scores, reduced GPA, and a greater likelihood of having a reported behavioral infraction, suspension, or expulsion following a homicide in their neighborhood, compared to before the homicide occurred.

- While the average effects of living in close proximity to homicide appeared relatively small overall, they likely combine cases where **a) students are unaffected with b) students most directly connected to such events grapple with much larger challenges.**
- **Some schools mitigated typical negative effects of living in proximity to homicide on academic performance.** When comparing schools serving similar students with similar experiences outside of schools, most student outcomes declined after homicide near their home—but not all schools saw average declines in student outcomes.
- **Schools that mitigate the negative effects of living in close geographic proximity to homicide on students' academic outcomes were characterized by strong, positive school climates** across a range of measures, including engaging instruction and trusting, connected relationships among students and between students and adults.
- **Systems, structures, and routines that coordinate the support adults provide, center students, and emphasize connection and relationship between adults and young people were vital tools for the educators, administrators, and school staff interviewed.**
  - Teams in schools that mitigated the negative effects of homicide faced substantial challenges—the scale of needs appeared to outpace the capacity to respond; the challenges of balancing providing direct services to students with coordinating care, particularly the burdens of data analysis and paperwork were often overwhelming; and the complexity of coordinating efforts to leverage external community resources and partnerships was considerable.

## Considerations

This report offers evidence that schools can, and do, mitigate the negative impacts of adversity that young people experience. At the same time, this is complex, resource-intensive, and emotionally-taxing work, requiring time, resources and intentional strategies.

Elected, civic, and community leaders can consider:

- **Greater public investment in addressing the epidemic of gun violence and the broader, longstanding historical disinvestment in communities of color throughout the city is needed for more educational equity.** The degree to which students, families, and communities of color live in proximity to homicide is neither incidental nor random. Patterns of violence in Chicago, as elsewhere, are closely related to long-standing, intentionally racialized policies of social and economic isolation and neglect that concentrate poverty and hardship in communities of color over decades. This report documents the disproportionate negative impact that proximity to homicide has on the academic outcomes of students of color. It also provides evidence that educators and schools can play critical roles in mitigating some of those effects. These efforts alone will not be enough, and educators cannot be solely responsible for addressing, or more importantly preventing, violence across the city.
- **Intentional, coordinated, and sustained efforts of dedicated adults in schools can address harm to students and promote their resilience.** As long as there are high rates of violence in the communities that schools serve, the impact will be felt by students and families, and will require school staff to develop strategies to support students in intentional ways. Schools in communities with more violent events will require more intentional efforts and supports. Schools can play a crucial role in the lives of students who experience adversity in their lives outside school. Well-organized systems and structures, such as behavioral health teams (BHTs) and effective use of tiered, evidence-based intervention strategies can help ensure that information, resources, and support are shared in timely and responsive fashion. These structures help adults manage the complexity of providing the considerable support required to meet the needs of young people and their families. In the relatively small number of schools that face the greatest volume and most acute student needs, these systems and structures can also help to coordinate the considerably greater resources and support required.

- **Deep, sustained effort in building and sustaining strong, collaborative, and trusting relationships among adults in schools can help make schools more responsive and more effective at mitigating the negative impact of violence.** School leaders play a critically important role in helping create and sustain school communities that are responsive to students' needs. The work of building responsive school climate, however, is also broadly shared and reflects the importance of prioritizing resources and supports for creating school and classroom environments that are organized to be student-centered. Interviews with staff in schools that were more successful in mitigating the impact of homicide on students' academic performance highlighted the importance of communication, coordination, and trust across members of the school community in their efforts to support students.
- **Strong, supportive, and trusting relationships between educators and students are a crucial resource for protecting students from harm and promoting resilient school communities.** The quality of the school climate and culture matter, broadly; however, the particular quality of relationships,

particularly between educators and students, is a critically important barometer for the success of efforts to mitigate the negative impacts of living in close proximity to homicide. Efforts to make school systems and structures—particularly how a school responds to student misconduct—broadly restorative are an important part of the broader strategy of focusing on relationship and connectedness.

**Responsive, resilient school communities do not emerge from a single initiative, require substantial resources, and demand sustained and hard work in the face of immensely difficult circumstances.** It is not the presence (nor the absence) of one or another initiative or approach to supporting students that makes a school responsive or resilient. Instead, as the findings from this report underscore, it is the interlocking of multiple different efforts intended to center and respond to the experiences, perspectives, and needs of students that create a holistic, shared approach to making schools more responsive to their needs. Partnerships between schools and community-based organizations can help to extend the reach and impact of schools' efforts as well. The development of responsive, resilient school communities is shared work and cannot be accomplished in isolation.