

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ICF, on behalf of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), conducted a needs assessment from Fall 2024 – Spring 2025 to better understand resources available to support Pennsylvania residents who have experienced or been exposed to gun violence. The assessment included an online survey and focus groups with individuals who have experienced gun violence and a variety of services and programs in each region of the state. The three primary research questions were:

1. What services are needed by individuals who have experienced gun violence?
2. What resources are currently available in Pennsylvania communities?
3. What resources are not available, misaligned, or are hard to access?

PCCD will use the needs assessment findings to inform the enhancement of “resiliency” resources across the Commonwealth. This effort aims to build the infrastructure for long-term support and safety, offer trauma-informed and culturally-responsive resources, and address long-term impacts across the lifespan for communities experiencing high rates of gun violence.

Focus on ways to nurture hope, healing, and necessities rather than resilience.

It was critical to first understand the definition and perceived goal of resiliency and how that compares among communities and individuals who are living with repeated experience and exposure to gun violence. Through focus groups, individuals who have experienced gun violence defined resilience in a variety of ways. Most notably, participants had a negative reaction to the notion of a “resiliency” center and expressed a desire to reframe the focus toward healing. For example, community members expressed that resilience is not a choice, but something that is necessary for survival. Many participants felt that “resilience” implied that they should be able to recover quickly after experiencing gun violence and there was a way to “fix them”, rather than encompassing the life-long journey of survival, adversity, and healing.



Service availability needs to include meeting basic needs first and being located within smaller, defined boundaries of community.

The needs assessment found that Pennsylvania communities generally had a plethora of providers within larger counties or across rural regions, but better coordination and reduced barriers could improve awareness of and access to services. Many individuals were unaware of free and low-cost services in their community, did not feel like they needed formal support under the umbrella as a “victim”, felt discouraged by the stigma around service seeking, or faced community-level barriers in accessing resources, such as unreliable or expensive transportation and providers who do not come from or represent their community.

Build trust and awareness. Individuals who experienced gun violence often learned about services through family, friends, community leaders, and community events. They preferred hyperlocal providers with “local” reputations; meaning providers were in their closeknit community boundary, referred to by friends and family, and understanding of their culture and traditions. These findings highlight the importance of trust and repour-building among service providers.

Fulfill basic needs first and provide navigators. When basic needs, such as safe housing, are unmet, individuals focus on survival and do not have an opportunity to access other services after experiencing gun violence and while in a life-long journey of healing. Communities are looking for ease in accessing resources rather than additional barriers and a roadmap of care, such as network of service providers and community partners who coordinate services and collaboration on referrals and support options.

Integrate youth voices and perspectives. Exposure to violence was normalized among youth participants. They believed that most people in their community were in “survival mode”. Youth said that guns provide a sense of safety, education around gun safety is missing, and guns are easy to access. Youth felt “alone” and like they could not talk to “friends”, “those they didn’t trust”, or their “parents” because they feel vulnerable, fear being judged, and/or lack understanding about the stressors they are experiencing. The top three connections that youth made to gaining their attention and building trust were through food, sports/arts, and social media.

“They try to give you a therapist years along the line when I had talked to someone, but I felt like that therapist couldn't connect with me because they didn't live that life. They was there listening, but do you really know about this trauma and you know, the life of a drug dealer ... a black man in an inner city, going through street wars, seeing dead bodies and beside itself and, you know, really going through it?”

— Study Participant

Multidisciplinary coordination, local infrastructure, and more importantly long-term service provision remain paramount in community-based recommendations.

The recommendations in this report were built on the inspiring work Pennsylvania communities have done to support individuals experiencing gun violence and can serve as a foundation from which service providers, state and local government officials, law enforcement, and community partners can build stronger relationships with one another as well as with the communities they serve. Findings from this needs assessment indicate that service providers feel constrained by a lack of resources while community members expressed a desire for more community representation, a wider variety of services, and increased accountability among service providers to ensure that they are providing quality and necessary services to the community. Statewide, individuals experiencing gun violence said believing that services would help them heal and support others in the community motivates them to seek help.

Develop hyperlocal news services for neighborhoods and provide training on trauma-informed reporting. Create a website, newsletter, and/or social media account that covers local news for specific neighborhoods.

Train journalists on trauma-informed reporting and interactions with violence-affected individuals. These efforts could inform residents about community issues and events, available resources and services when violence occurs, and could encourage readers to provide input into neighborhood issues.

Raise awareness about and teach gun safety. Educate individuals, especially youth, about the fundamental principles of gun safety. Education could cover topics on the responsibilities of gun owners, impacts of handling guns unsafely, and accountability for using guns unsafely.

Enhance access to devices that secure firearms and training on how to use those devices. Engage in non-judgmental discussions about gun access in the home, provide free/low-cost gun locks and gun safes, and provide educational resources to prevent unintentional deaths.

Make services available long term, beyond the initial crisis period. Many participants felt overwhelmed by the number of service providers reaching out (in addition to informal support) during the first year, before they were ready to receive services. When they were ready to seek formal services, those services were often hard to find.

The authors extend their heartfelt gratitude to service providers who participated in and helped disseminate the two surveys, as well as those who distributed invitations to participate in focus groups. Their efforts contributed greatly to the collection of rich, candid, and insightful data from professionals and individuals impacted by gun violence across Pennsylvania.

We are deeply grateful to all study participants for their bravery and for taking the time to share their experiences in the survey and focus groups. We are deeply thankful for their trust in us, and immensely appreciative of the invaluable insights they provided into the strengths and needs of gun violence services across the Commonwealth. These contributions will help improve services for individuals impacted by gun violence throughout Pennsylvania and will offer learnings for improving services on a much larger scale.

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