

U.S.  
Chicago Business Group Backs Big Push Into Violence Prevention

With pledge to help cut homicides in half, group offers support for new mayor's focus on root causes of crime

Louis Lockett, in blue, speaking to one of his life coaches at the Chicago CRED violence-prevention program.

By [Joe Barrett](#) | Photographs by [Mustafa Hussain](#) for *The Wall Street Journal*  
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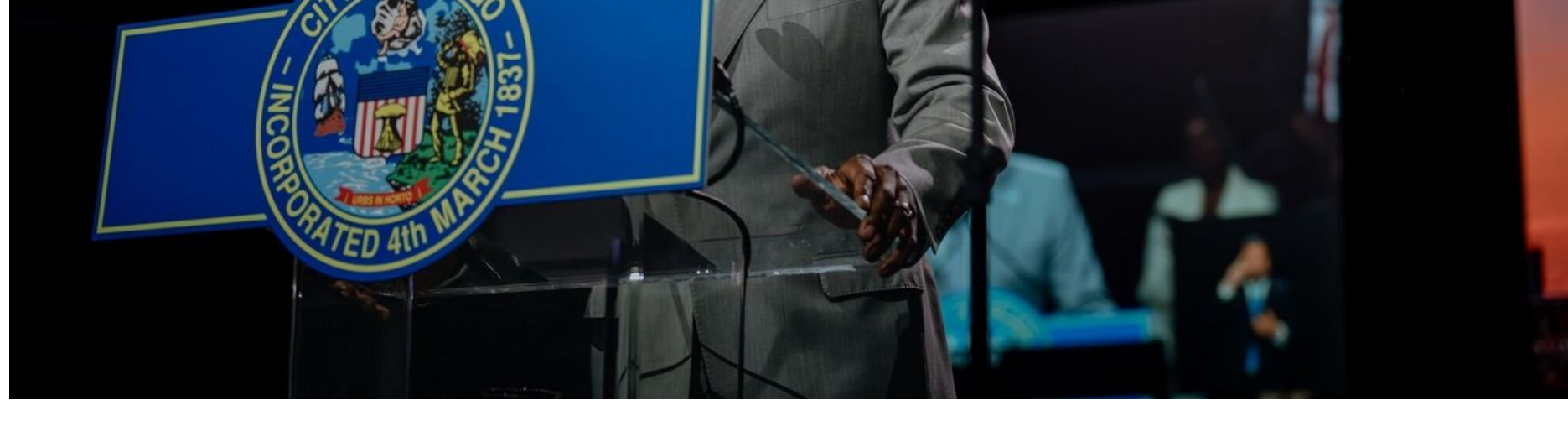
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CHICAGO—Crime was [the biggest issue](#) in this spring's Chicago mayoral race, and business leaders largely supported Paul Vallas, whose solution was putting more cops on the street.

His opponent, Brandon Johnson, [won the race](#) with a plan to attack the root causes of crime with things like summer jobs, mental health programs and economic development in distressed neighborhoods. The problem was how to pay for it and get [business buy-in](#).

Now, the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, a powerful group representing the biggest businesses in the city, has stepped forward to fill that void.

The Civic Committee, which has backed other major initiatives like modernization of O'Hare Airport but has largely steered clear of public safety, this month rolled out a plan with an ambitious goal of cutting homicides in the nation's third-largest city in half from their recent peak within five years. It involves bringing the city, nonprofits and the business community together to boost investment in neglected neighborhoods, create more jobs for people at risk of getting involved in violence and greatly expand violence-prevention efforts.



Brandon Johnson was elected mayor of Chicago this spring after a contentious race in which crime was the top issue. PHOTO: JAMIE KELTER DAVIS/BLOOMBERG NEWS

"We are relatively late to this conversation, and we are showing up to see what our contribution can be," said billionaire Jim Crown, scion of one of the richest families in the city and chairman of the Civic Committee's public safety task force.

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The Johnson administration said in a statement it is grateful to the Civic Committee for "spearheading this effort, and we look forward to working with them to build a better, stronger, safer Chicago."

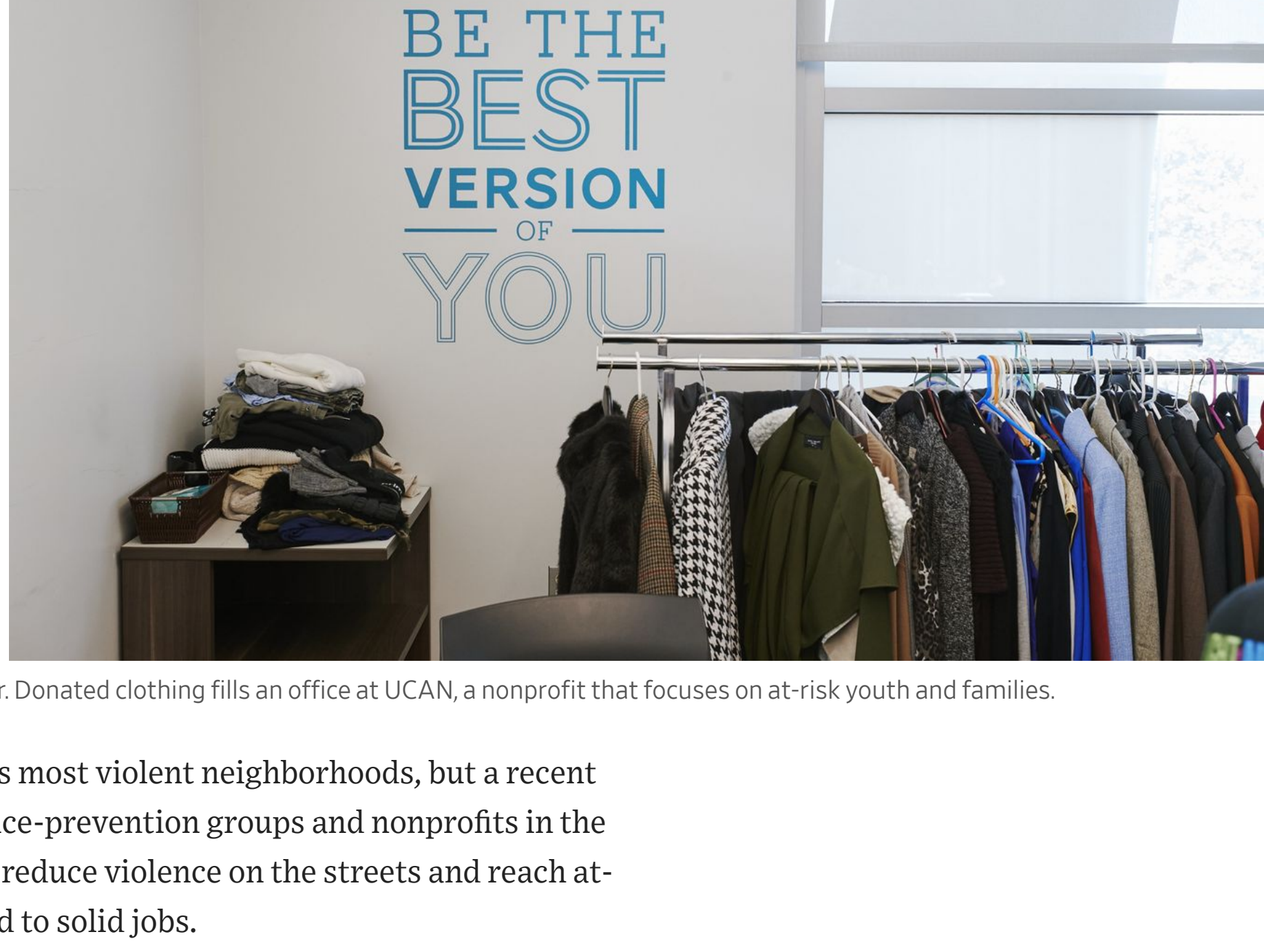
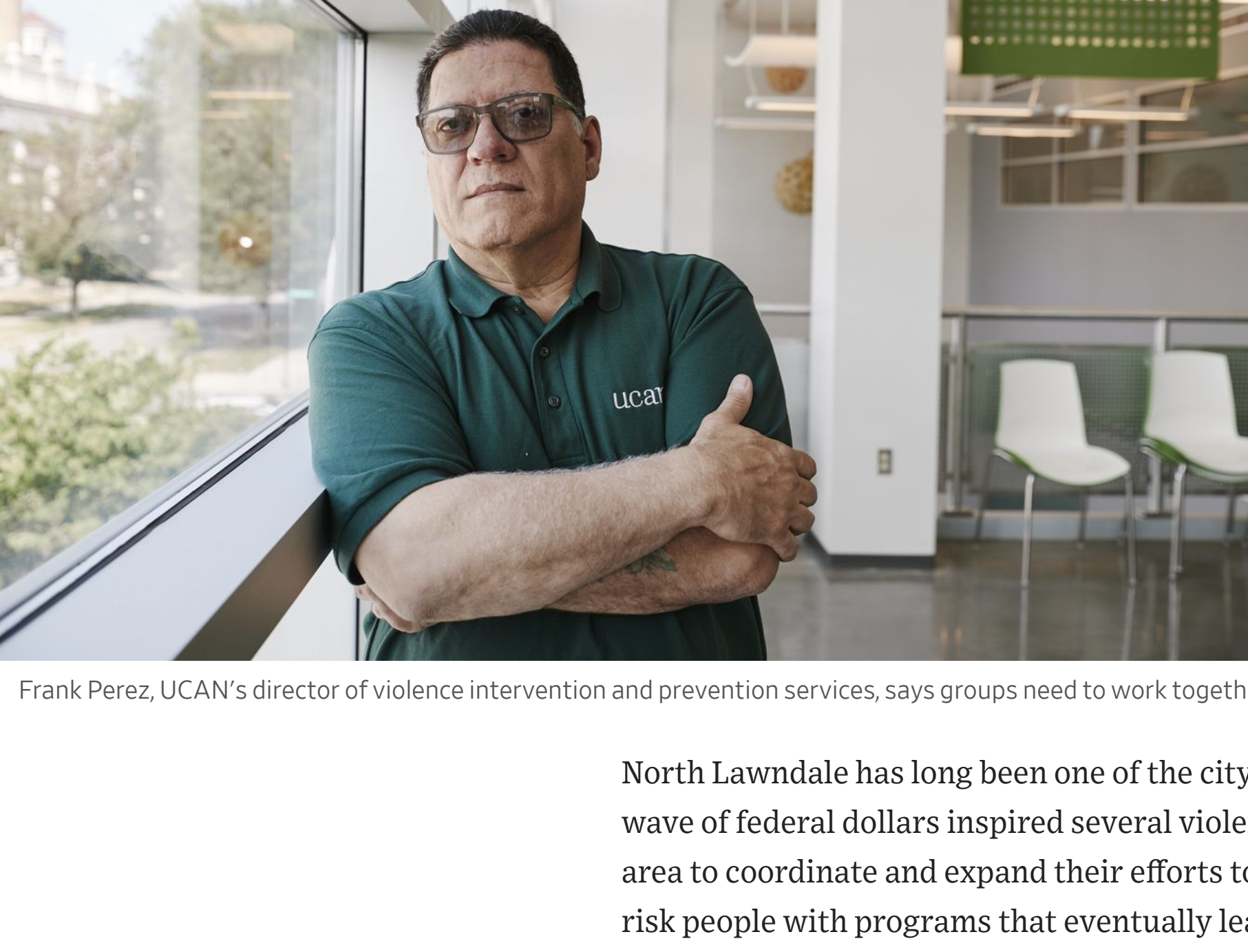
Crown said business leaders in his group were nearly unanimous in conversations starting last summer that public safety is the biggest issue facing the city. In addition to bringing jobs and investment to hard-hit areas, the group pledged to push for changes at the Chicago Police Department and expand violence-prevention efforts to reach 75% of people most at risk of committing a shooting or being shot, up from around 20% today.

"It's a big commitment, but we wanted to put something out there that we felt was possible, not easy," he said.

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One West Side neighborhood where Crown Family Philanthropies has been involved in efforts to expand violence-prevention work could provide a model for what the Civic Committee aims to roll out citywide.



Frank Perez, UCAN's director of violence intervention and prevention services, says groups need to work together. Donated clothing fills an office at UCAN, a nonprofit that focuses on at-risk youth and families.

North Lawndale has long been one of the city's most violent neighborhoods, but a recent wave of federal dollars inspired several violence-prevention groups and nonprofits in the area to coordinate and expand their efforts to reduce violence on the streets and reach at-risk people with programs that eventually lead to solid jobs.

The coordination makes it clear which groups operate in which areas, maps out where rival street factions have agreed to avoid conflict and where they haven't, and smooths the path for new recruits to get services—like job training and placement—from different members of the collaborative. Altogether the groups serve about 688 of the estimated 1,250 people most at risk, according to a March report from the collaborative, which launched its effort in 2022.

In the first full year, shootings and homicides in North Lawndale fell by 41%, one of the largest drops in the city. So far this year, homicides are up again, rising 25%, while shootings have increased 37%—results that could be skewed by the relatively small number of offenses before the busy summer months. Both are still below the figures for 2021, which were the highest since the 1990s.



Police investigating a shooting in 2017 in North Lawndale, which has long been one of Chicago's most violent neighborhoods. PHOTO: JOSHUA LOTT/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Louis Lockett, 31, had just finished a group session on a recent day at an unmarked office of a violence-prevention group called Chicago CRED, or Create Real Economic Destiny. He said he had been selling drugs since he was about 14 and finally started to turn around his life after serving time in prison for a gun offense. He got in touch with Chicago CRED about a year ago through an outreach worker who has become like a big brother to him. "We talk about everything. I was just in a dark spot and he got me a little light," he said.

Lockett said he receives \$450 every two weeks from CRED and spends three hours, three mornings a week in a group session on things like avoiding conflict and processing trauma. He also works overnight at Amazon.com and picks up occasional construction work.

He said people in the neighborhood will still try to pull him into trouble. "If you don't want to let me do right, I just gotta let you go because I'm tired of doing wrong," he said.

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Such individual victories can only go so far in changing the broader culture when there are thousands more men at risk than violence-prevention groups have been able to help, said Arne Duncan, former education secretary in the Obama administration, who runs Chicago CRED.

"What happens if you're helping guys change their lives, and the neighborhood's not changing around them?" he said. "We're changing individual lives, which is amazing, inspiring, powerful and meaningful, but we have to start to change it at scale."



UCAN's Lamont Tucker and Michael Thomas, along with other violence-prevention workers, walking through a neighborhood after a recent mass shooting.

Making that happen required the nonviolence groups to learn how to work together, said Frank Perez, director of violence intervention and prevention services for UCAN, a more than 150-year-old nonprofit based in North Lawndale that focuses on at-risk youth and families.

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Is investment and a coordinated effort between businesses, government and nonprofits the solution to reducing crime in cities? Join the conversation below.

"In previous years, they were working in silos, nobody trusted anybody," he said. "This is not a problem that one agency can master or eliminate by itself. We have to work together."

On a recent day, Michael Thomas, 46, a full-time worker for UCAN, joined dozens of other violence-prevention workers from different groups in a march through the nearby Austin neighborhood, where a mass shooting the previous weekend had left one young woman dead and six others injured.

"We try to give the neighbors a safe space and make it feel like they can come outside without being scared," said Thomas, who sold illegal narcotics before being hired to help resolve a dispute in his neighborhood.

Outreach workers had already looked into the incident to try to prevent any further shootings. "It was just a personal altercation and it turned out bad. We try to get them together and mediate the situation so there won't be any retaliation."

Write to Joe Barrett at [Joseph.Barrett@wsj.com](mailto:Joseph.Barrett@wsj.com)

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