

**PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT:
YOUTH SAFETY AND
VIOLENCE IN MINNEAPOLIS**

MAY 2025

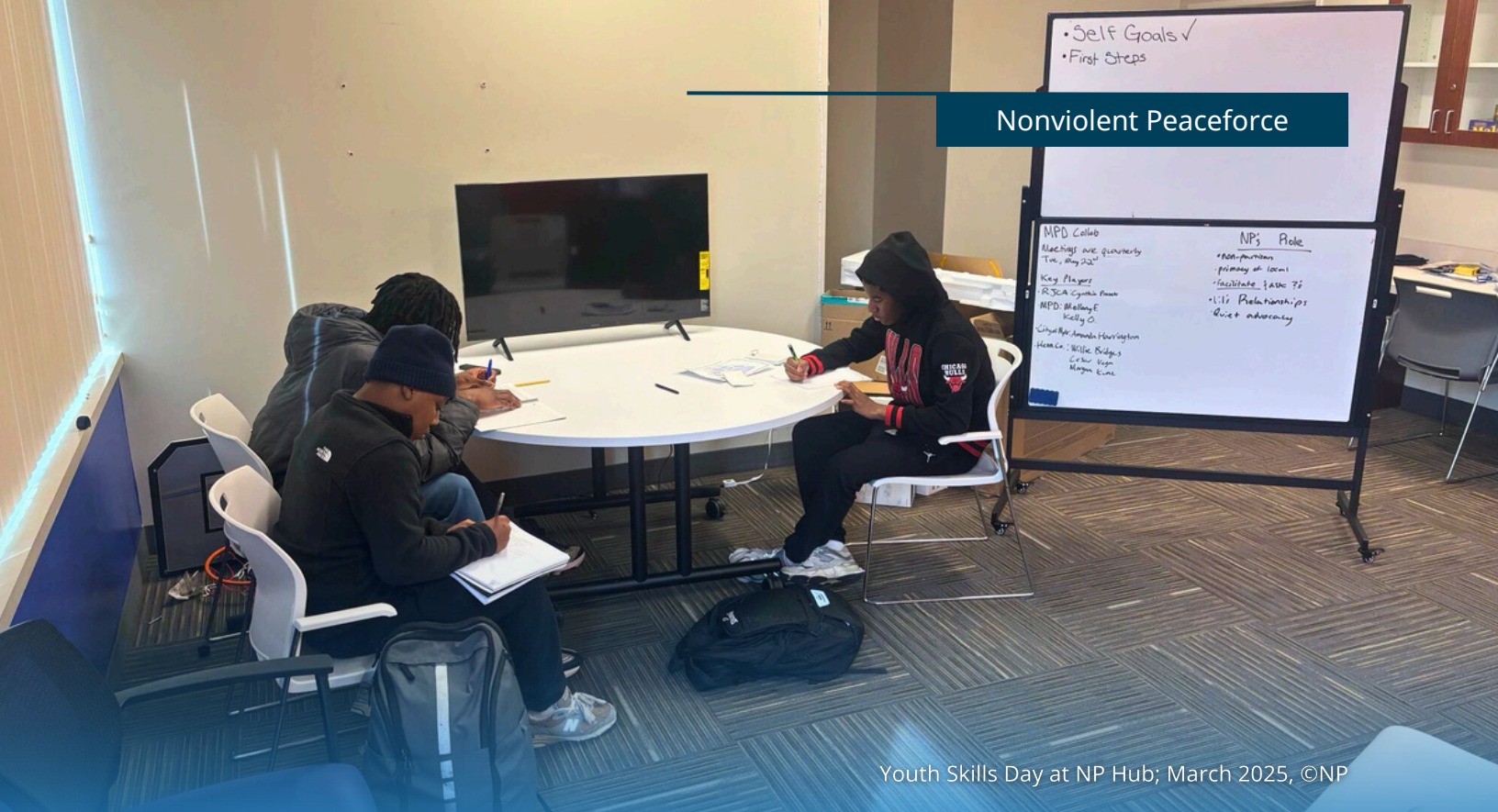
Nonviolent **Peaceforce**

Background

Despite promising trends and the lowest rates of gun violence in North Minneapolis in over a decade in 2024, young people, particularly young African American men, continue to face many challenges. In this program spotlight, we highlight the key safety risks that these young people face, the interventions that are making a difference in their lives, and the critical investments that need to be made to sustain this progress.

This analysis is grounded in NP's sustained, on-the-ground presence and its deep-rooted relationships with youth and community members in North Minneapolis. This spotlight is based on a combination of qualitative insights gathered through daily engagement and mentorship, as well as input from stakeholders such as community partners, service providers, and organizations like the Minneapolis Office of Community Safety, Health and Human Services, and the Minneapolis Police Department. NP also conducted a survey in collaboration with Wilder Research, which captured the perspectives of over 200 local residents. This data was further contextualized using publicly available incident and demographic statistics to identify trends and inform risk assessment. Together, these sources provide a multidimensional understanding of the challenges facing youth and the impact of NP's community-led, nonviolent interventions.

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP)'s programmatic work in Minneapolis began in 2020 through school safety and election safety interventions. In 2021, the program fully launched as NP worked to protect civic spaces, from protest spaces to festivals to community forums. In 2022, NP developed the Community Peacebuilders Initiative in North Minneapolis, which works to transform community safety by providing communities with the skills and tools to create a grassroots-led, alternative, and nonviolent response to conflict. To create a more consistent, nonviolent presence and build relationships with the community, NP opened the Hub for Nonviolence and Safety in November 2023. The Hub has a dedicated youth space where NP's team connects with youth and provides them with practical skills such as de-escalation and upstander intervention training.



Youth Skills Day at NP Hub; March 2025, ©NP

Safety Risks to Youth in North Minneapolis

Youth in North Minneapolis are disproportionately affected by and exposed to violence. Although the area accounts for only 15% of the city's population, it represents 34% of domestic violence incidents, 40% of homicides, and over a third of gun-related crimes. Economic hardship further compounds these struggles as poverty rates are double the citywide average. Despite gun violence rate reductions over the past decade, young people in the area face a range of challenges linked to inequality and lack of access to services. In trying to overcome these challenges, youth are often faced with difficult social and economic choices, and risk being drawn into negative coping mechanisms in response.

Many of the risks faced by youth in North Minneapolis today, particularly those faced by the African American youth NP works with, can be traced back to decades of historic violence, marginalization, and underinvestment, most recently highlighted through brutality and violence by state-sanctioned police officers. According to Jillian Peterson, Ph.D., who has studied violence in Minnesota extensively, "The most likely victim of a homicide is a young man of color." This statement is reflected by the data, where in 2023, 79% of shooting victims in Minneapolis were Black, with the disparity even higher among juvenile shooting victims, 89% of whom were Black.

NP's staff have observed that youth in North Minneapolis are especially impacted by violence linked to three major trends: carjackings, fentanyl use, and homelessness.

1. Carjacking, often for joyrides or as part of armed robbery, is becoming increasingly common among youth. Many are driven by the thrill or peer pressure, with little thought to the serious consequences for themselves and others. Children as young as 10 years old have been linked to these incidents, with some tragically losing their lives in crashes or altercations with law enforcement. This trend poses grave risks not only to those directly involved but also to the broader community.
2. Fentanyl use and distribution also present a severe risk of violence for youth in North Minneapolis. Fentanyl is a cheap and accessible drug for many. Use of fentanyl increased significantly among teens during the COVID-19 pandemic. While deaths due to fentanyl use have decreased across Minnesota since 2022, they have continued to increase in North Minneapolis. Due to economic hardship and repeated exposure, many also resort to selling the substance. This increases their risk of involvement in gun violence, such as shootouts, when they knowingly or unknowingly enter territorial disputes by selling in neighborhoods controlled by powerful dealers.
3. Homelessness is another significant concern that increases the risk of violence for young people in the area. Economic hardship, substance abuse, and domestic violence often lead youth in Minneapolis to leave home at a young age, resorting to "couch surfing" with friends without adult guidance or support. With basic needs unmet, young people may turn to violence, particularly violent robbery, as a survival tactic. Participation in such unlawful activities exposes both the youth and the wider community to immediate and long-term risks of violence. Despite falling crime rates in North Minneapolis, the involvement of youth in unlawful actions remains a growing concern, as the average age of the child or teen involved continues to decline.

Responding to youth safety risks in Minneapolis

As communities and young people in North Minneapolis navigate these challenges, three key responses are having an impact, and if prioritized and invested in, have the potential to reshape safety in the area. This is not only about responding to harm, but preventing it in the first place, and investing in systems that support community and youth safety. Violence prevention is a priority for the community, where over 200 community members involved in a collaborative research outreach effort by NP and Wilder Research affirmed that addressing youth needs is critical to reducing violence. These efforts must respond to violence holistically, including preventing it before it happens, interrupting it as it is ongoing, and providing opportunities for healing and accountability after harm has occurred. NP's ongoing programming offers opportunities for sustained engagement of local youth, not as recipients of intervention, but as frontline peacebuilders capable of interrupting cycles of violence and reshaping their environments.

A) Youth outreach, healing, and peace education

NP's outreach program interrupts cycles of violence by equipping young African American men, whether deeply street-involved or not, with the tools, relationships, and confidence to lead safer lives and protect their peers. The program provides intensive support to a select group of students from North High School in Minneapolis through multiple weekly after-school sessions and biweekly Saturday trainings. After-school sessions use sports and interest-based activities to build trust and open spaces for mentoring and reflection. "Mental days," held on Saturdays, focus on UCP tools for self and peer de-escalation, including the OODA Loop, Anchor Points, CLARA communication, and situational awareness. These sessions also address life skills, personal goal setting, and career preparedness, recognizing that long-term safety is rooted in both immediate de-escalation and sustainable futures.

The program's strength lies in its consistency and relational depth. Staff maintain daily contact with youth, cultivating relationships where students feel safe, accountable, and empowered to lead. As one participant noted, "We're only with NP for maybe two hours a day, and the other 22 hours we're receiving very different messages." NP ensures those two hours are transformative, reframing narratives around violence, and reinforcing youth capacity to lead change.



NP Community Event; June 2024, ©NP

B) Community protection and violence interruption

Modeling how to interrupt violence using nonviolent strategies is another key element of NP's approach to violence reduction in Minneapolis. NP staff are not only training youth in unarmed civilian protection, but they are demonstrating it in action. For example, during a recent altercation at a local school, an NP Community Peacebuilder physically and verbally interposed himself between students amid an escalating fight. Rather than relying on force, he employed de-escalation tactics and protective presence to defuse the situation and prevent harm.

This real-time intervention provided a powerful learning moment. Students in the peacebuilding program were present and later reflected with NP staff, asking what they had felt in the moment and why they chose to intervene. Exchanges like this deepen youth understanding of how to resolve conflict nonviolently and practice peace under pressure. Through consistent presence and example, NP is cultivating youth leaders who not only learn peace, they live it.

C) Creating safer spaces

Beyond crisis moments, NP creates consistent, unarmed spaces that model a different way of living together. Every Monday, community members gather at NP's hub in North Minneapolis for coffee or lemonade, and regularly for neighborhood barbecues. These events are intentionally gun-free and grounded in care, offering an alternative to environments shaped by violence or fear. By holding space for joy, dialogue, and connection, NP is normalizing community protection as a way of life, not just a reaction to harm.

Case Study:

Youth as leaders of peace and protection

With consistent guidance from NP staff, students are putting UCP tools into action, including intervening to de-escalate fights, redirecting peers from conflict, and providing protective presence for one another. These are not isolated moments; they are the result of deliberate capacity-building, consistent mentorship, and a belief in youth as protectors.

Recently, in North Minneapolis, tensions flared outside a high school gymnasium as a fight broke out among a group of students, an all-too-common scene that can quickly spiral out of control. Fights like these have the potential to escalate fast, drawing in bystanders, triggering panic, or even inviting police involvement that can lead to lasting consequences for the young people present. Armed security was already on site, anticipating the worst. What truly stood out that day wasn't the intervention of adults; it was the leadership of the youth themselves.

Odell Wilson, a Community Peacebuilder with Nonviolent Peaceforce and a trusted mentor to the youth, quickly noticed some of the program participants hovering near the scene. Fully aware of how easily youth, especially African American youth, can be misunderstood or blamed in chaotic moments, he moved to redirect them, calling out a few by name to return to safety. One young man turned to him and said,

“I wasn’t going out there to watch the fight—I was making sure none of our people were getting involved.”

Then, something else remarkable happened. Another teen, known informally as the team captain because of his natural leadership, stepped forward. As others inched toward the doors, he planted himself in the entrance, arms outstretched. With both authority and urgency, he said, **“No, y’all need to go back into the gym. It’s not even worth it.”** His words cut through the noise. He wasn't just keeping people safe, he was modeling what leadership looks like in real time.

What this young person demonstrated was a powerful example of Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP): de-escalating through interpositioning, placing himself between potential violence and his peers, and protective presence, using his voice and body to diffuse the situation. He turned what could have been another viral video of youth violence into a quiet act of courage.

In a moment where chaos threatened to take over, it wasn't the adults or the security officers who made the difference, it was the youth, empowered through trust, mentorship, and community. They showed that prevention doesn't always come in uniform. Sometimes, it wears a jersey, speaks in familiar slang, and steps up when it matters most.

Future Outlook and Urgent Action

Youth involved in NP's program have started sharing the tools they learn with those around them and asking to connect their friends and classmates to NP. Due to capacity limitations and an uncertain funding future, NP has had to turn youth away from the program while still trying to find effective ways to engage them and support them.

Federal funding for NP's youth program was terminated in April 2025. We remain committed to the North Minneapolis community and consistently show up for youth who are working to break cycles of violence. Federal funding cuts have affected a broad range of peacebuilding and community safety programs throughout the country. Private donors and local governments must step up to support these programs, championing a safer future for us all. To do that, we need to urgently:

1

Cultivate the ecosystem of community safety in North Minneapolis.

Many organizations are working to address and prevent violence in North Minneapolis, yet these organizations do not currently collaborate in a way that maximizes their collective impact. Key efforts, such as those at the City Office of Community Safety and Protect MN, have sought to support the collaborative work of the community safety groups. These efforts must continue and include capacity-building support for the many grassroots organizations that are at the forefront of this work.

2

Alongside violence intervention efforts, invest in violence prevention efforts.

Much of the traditional Community Violence Intervention (CVI) work has been focused on supporting violence interrupters who step into situations to diffuse them after violence has already occurred. This work is crucial but must be paired with upstream, preventative efforts that address the root causes of violence and equip community members with the skills to de-escalate violence before it starts. These proactive interventions must be funded through mechanisms that support them to have consistent and long-term impacts on communities.

3

Provide and protect alternatives to federal funding.

Many organizations and community initiatives to address violence in North Minneapolis are currently dependent on federal funding. As federal funding diminishes and federal priorities change, private donors, foundations, and state, county, and city-level governments must step in to support this important work. This may include adding new accounts for community safety, making existing accounts more flexible, or reprioritizing community safety amongst other competing priorities.

4

Support community-based diversion pathways for youth accused of delinquency.

Community-based diversion pathways have proven to be effective in engaging youth who have been involved in crime in a positive, restorative manner that supports their participation in the community and reduces their risk of being involved in future offenses. An effective diversion program must interrupt cycles of violence, combat underlying inequities, foster the inner development of youth necessary to sustain long-lasting peace and equip them with practical tools for future success.

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