



# Bristol and Oakland City Exchange Report

By Rachel Locke, with Kelsey Paul Shantz

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## Executive Summary

In early October 2025, Chief Holly Joshi and Sara Serin-Christ of the Oakland, California, USA, Department of Violence Prevention traveled to Bristol, UK, for a tailored peer exchange. The exchange primarily focused on two key areas: (1) the utility, core principles, and effective component parts of a central office or department of violence prevention and (2) deepened conversation on gendered aspects of violence and associated prevention strategies. Beyond these two core areas, the exchange offered opportunities for sharing ideas and expertise regarding youth mental health, respectful and grounded community engagement, creative approaches to institutional buy-in, funding approaches, and more. Both cities have had success with their investments in prevention and public-safety building. But Oakland and Bristol also struggle with legacies and present-day manifestations of deep racism and structural inequality that impact the health and well-being of large swaths of their populations.

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## Overview of Exchange

The city exchange between Oakland, California, USA, and Bristol, UK, took place October 6–10, 2025. The Oakland delegation representing the Department of Violence Prevention (DVP) included Chief Dr. Holly Joshi, and Gender-Based Violence Program Planner Sara Serin-Christ.

From Bristol, the exchange included several representatives from Empire Fighting Chance, a UK registered charity that provides a range of support to young people in some of Bristol's least-advantaged communities. EFC Cofounder Martin Bisp helped to plan and organize most aspects of the exchange with others. Both Oakland's DVP and Bristol's EFC are members of Peace in Our Cities (PiOC). Two PiOC secretariat members—Rachel Locke and Kelsey Paul Shantz—also attended.

The City Exchange Program is an initiative facilitated by Peace in Our Cities, which, as a network, invests in cities learning from and inspiring one another. Focused exchanges help participating cities and organizations engage deeply with promising work being done to reduce violence, assess applicability to their own contexts, and develop direct partnerships to advance prevention and peacebuilding.

## Why These Partners

This exchange grew out of conversations that began during the PiOC member meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, in February 2025. For several years, EFC has been exploring the launching of a centralized, coordinated office of violence prevention in Bristol or its surrounding region to complement existing investments in public safety and, in particular, the reduction of knife violence in the city. Peace in Our Cities has been accompanying EFC in this exploration, including by providing a technical report with recommendations following a previous weeklong support visit. This work aligned with PiOC research on [Offices of Violence Prevention](#) (OVPs) made available to all network members and publicly.

Place-based divisions in Bristol are tied to significant income inequality as well as Bristol's history as one of the main port cities engaged in the transatlantic trade of enslaved people. Group identity is thus tightly linked to community postal codes, with certain areas of the city facing significant underinvestment and residents of those areas facing far higher barriers to participating in the growth economy that the rest of Bristol has experienced in recent years. The unequal distribution of benefits and harm across the city is similarly experienced in Oakland, making this a key point of commonality across the two locales. Two neighborhoods of significance within Bristol are Easton and St. Pauls. Group violence tied to these territories primarily affects youth and most impacts those closest to the violence, both in proximity and relationship to those directly involved. Youth are most heavily impacted by retributive cycles of knife violence.

Located between the communities of Easton and St. Pauls, [EFC is uniquely positioned](#) as it serves both areas. While EFC has been exceptionally successful in reaching young people in the target area, broader coalitions of investment and support are needed city- and region-wide in order to affect the more-structural conditions that make community violence more likely in some areas than in others. It should be noted, however, that other forms of violence, including domestic violence, are not necessarily restricted to the areas of Easton and St. Pauls but are more evenly distributed.

Like Bristol, Oakland is a city deeply impacted by legacies of racism and structural inequalities, creating a need to do individual work to support those caught up in violence while also focusing on the broader socioeconomic context. Oakland's DVP was established in 2017 with a mandate to focus on improving safety and stability for families and individuals living in areas most highly impacted by violence in the city. The design of the DVP called for a leadership structure on equal standing with the chief of police, reinforcing the belief that public safety is not the responsibility of law enforcement alone. The Oakland DVP works with a range of partners across the city to support services that aid in building peace and safety while also directing targeted action to interrupt or intervene in cycles of harm and violence. Among its key pillars is working to reduce domestic violence and commercial sexual exploitation. Like EFC, the DVP prioritizes communities directly impacted by violence.

Given the keen interest of many in Bristol to learn more about the OVP approach, this exchange was tailored primarily around direct learning on effective components of a centralized prevention approach. However, given respective areas of expertise, the exchange also included opportunities for mentoring and an exchange of ideas between Oakland's lead on gender-based violence (GBV) and the staff of EFC, as well as learning more about Bristol's highly effective box therapy program and youth engagement more broadly.

## **Key Objectives of the Exchange**

The overarching objectives of the exchange were to share knowledge between a well-established office of violence prevention and key partners in Bristol. Specifically, the exchange aimed to:

- Provide leadership exchange on what’s needed to create and sustain an effective office of violence prevention. Provide space to brainstorm various aspects, including a community-centered approach, appropriate diagnosis or analysis of violence, political buy-in, and more.
- Provide space for mentoring and learning about respective approaches to gender-based violence and gendered aspects of prevention activities.
- Share more-detailed knowledge about EFC’s approach to youth engagement and advocacy.

## What We Did

### Deep Dive Learning Exchange

The DVP and PiOC visitors met with a number of EFC staff to learn more about the programming generally. This included the coach manager, Matt Webster; the head of programs, Megan Knowelden; the community outreach manager, Courtney Young; and the community coach and operations assistant, Jen Mendonca. In these discussions, the visitors learned more about EFC’s approaches to integrated support for young people who may be facing violence, including their Box Coaching Program and Box Therapy Program.

EFC receives referrals for those who have been involved in knife crime, experience bullying, demonstrate mental health struggles and experience emotional dysregulation, have attempted suicide, are at risk of social isolation, cause disruption in school, or demonstrate addictive behavior. Most youth they serve are 12 to 16 years old, and the majority of EFC’s referrals come from schools, mental health services, parents, and police. Mental health services operates with a long waitlist, making it hard to access, so EFC provides an alternative. Although EFC also has a waitlist, it is nimbler and more proactive with enrollment than government services.

In Bristol, the neighborhoods of St. Pauls and Easton are EFC’s primary focus. It works with local groups in these areas trying to deliver support through less-formal and more-structured partnerships than those run by public agencies. EFC also works with intervention partners, including police, when there is reported or suspected abuse or harm taking place. The staff and programs of EFC serve as safeguards, standing up for and supporting young people.

The EFC team also spoke specifically about how they provide resources and support to the coaches themselves, many of whom are survivors of harm and have deep-lived experience of trauma. We also discussed the value of working with survivors of violence as well as those who have caused harm to understand and process their emotional triggers, including finding positive, healthy means to address how they may be triggered. There was a question about how to name this more intentionally, particularly when it comes to gendered violence.

**EFC Box Champions and Box Therapy Programs.** The Oakland DVP and PiOC visitors met individually with EFC staff overseeing both the [Box Champions](#) and [Box Therapy](#) programs to learn more about

the models. The purpose of the Box Champions approach is to integrate psychology-informed mentoring to young people through noncontact boxing training sessions. Over several sessions—which look more like boxing coaching than talk therapy—coaches support young people by equipping them to understand the nature of the mind and process feelings they may be experiencing. These coaches are supported by qualified therapists. The accompanying Box Therapy program is led by therapists who have received training on how to integrate coaching techniques into noncontact boxing. Over a series of one-hour sessions across twelve weeks, these therapists work with a young person to provide stigma-free therapy outside of clinics and in spaces where these young people may be more able to be themselves. Both the Box Champions and Box Therapy programs reinforce the integration of certain messages to youth across the full culture of the gym. In this way, mentoring and support extends from the “therapy room” to all corners of the boxing gym.

The programs are not aimed at “fixing” or diagnosing a problem. Rather the idea is to help young people first gain the confidence to show up, including showing up in a way that helps them understand their own habitual ways of thinking. The principles are about understanding, not about always feeling good. This can help youth make good decisions even when they are not feeling good or are experiencing hardship. The youth who come through EFC will experience anger, fear, and uncertainty, and the goal is to have them not feel as though they need to fight these emotions but be able to experience them in such ways that they make good decisions regardless of any negative stimulus.

All EFC mentors and box therapists go through training and follow key principles. The best measure of performance for EFC is performance itself - whether young people feel confident enough to return, to show up for a friend or family member, to follow through on commitments. EFC encourages young people to focus on self-realization and to see how dynamics around them may be influencing them in ways that otherwise would seem invisible.

**Oakland DVP.** As the delegation learned more about the EFC approach, Oakland partners also took time to share more about how the DVP works. The department primarily works to reduce group violence, domestic violence, and commercial sexual exploitation. While these three goals stand on their own, they are also interconnected. Research demonstrates that violent incidents are often linked through time, place, and social relations. Individuals who are impacted by one type of violence (e.g. group or network violence) are often highly associated with other types of violence (e.g. domestic violence, gendered violence). Violence also transmits intergenerationally.

The EFC team was particularly interested in learning more about Oakland’s approach to gender-based violence. Crucially, Oakland’s DVP integrates gender-based violence within all aspects of violence prevention. Oakland not only experiences high rates of gun violence but also high rates of gender-based violence, with 3,821 gender-related incidents reported in 2022—the equivalent of over 10 incidents a day in a city of roughly 440,000 people. In order to not overlook underlying causes of violence, gender-based violence experts are incorporated into response strategies.

The DVP does this in a variety of ways. First, it provides training in gender-based violence so that practitioners are aware of the connections between GBV and gun violence and how those intersections

impact communities that experience high rates of violence. The DVP also supports life coaches for survivors of GBV and provides funding for a network of community-based organizations working to support those experiencing domestic violence and sexual exploitation. The DVP is working to invest in the capacity of organizations that engage those who are causing gender-based harm. It is also creating a Peace Academy that will incorporate gender-based violence into community violence intervention trainings and certifications.

EFC participants in the exchange engaged intensively with the dialogue on gender, thinking about their own approach to supporting those who are struggling with gendered violence and what lessons they could incorporate into their own work. As part of this discussion, Sara Serin-Christ of Oakland's DVP presented the [Power and Control Wheel](#) and the [Equality Wheel](#) as tools that may prove useful for further analysis and coaching support. Important for any violence-reduction effort that seeks to address gendered violence is being intentional in naming what this violence looks like—both in physical and emotional manifestations. This includes talking about it with staff and integrating GBV-informed approaches into other existing areas of work. Being explicit and naming the violence, while also creating space for dialogue, increases the ability to develop positive outcomes that address intersectional experiences of violence. The more leaders and their staff can name what GBV is and what it looks like in interpersonal relationships, the more “normalized” the language becomes, encouraging staff to speak up and be better equipped to identify GBV, spot the signs of related dynamics, and support those who may be experiencing it.

## **Public Sector Partners**

In addition to discussions focused on the work on EFC and DVP, the exchange partners held a number of meetings with government officials, community members, and academic partners. Those meetings are summarized below.

**Police and Crime Commission.** The team met with Clare Moody, police and crime commissioner, Kevin Slocombe, deputy police and crime commissioner, and Natalie Lavis, director of the Violence Reduction Partnership. All represent the Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Commission, which is the region where Bristol sits and which provides policing and violence-reduction oversight to the city.

The Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) primarily focuses on those younger than 25 with a goal of supporting children and youth with a preventative lens, including through opportunity creation and diversion away from criminal justice systems. The Partnership also works with statutory organizations to connect them with young people in a way that helps them better orient toward youth needs. The Partnership is just one element among a number of different strands, including community safety structures and the work of other authorities. During the conversation it was acknowledged that government alone won't be the solution.

Among points of dialogue was a discussion of how to more authentically engage different parts of the community that may not always be in alignment with one another, while also scaling up in such a way that prevention investments become broadly impactful.

**Regional Mayor.** Helen Godwin, regional mayor of the West of England, shared details regarding the region, which is home to roughly 1.2 million people. There are only 14 regional mayors in England, making it a unique position of authority. The budgets of regional mayors relate to areas of housing, green spaces, economic development, private sector investment, and building workforce skills. The mayor's office also has some responsibility around youth determinants of health, which is connected to the struggles of violence. However, as in all municipalities, the responsibility and the budget for violence prevention is shared across a range of municipal, regional, and national agencies. Determining which pockets of funding can be utilized for which services and in ways that are complementary, rather than overlapping or competing, is part of the justification for a centralized office of prevention that can organize and detangle.

Mayor Godwin expressed her continued support to EFC and welcomed the opportunity to exchange ideas with external partners in order to more proactively support public safety and prevent violence.

## **Community Partners**

In addition to EFC, Bristol has a range of community organizations working to support youth and address vulnerabilities. In this conversation, key community partners shared their experience of working to address violence in Bristol and their thoughts regarding the establishment of an OVP. In particular, they raised the importance of communication and respect, that the further one is from a problem, the harder it is to see clearly. It's also important to engage youth in a similar way: being thoughtful about communication and approaching interactions with respect. There are currently several supportive opportunities for youth, but making connections to enable their participation doesn't always happen, and youth often feel left out or dismissed. Centering their voices is imperative.

The conversation also shed light on an emerging phenomenon that is shaping perceptions on violence: an increase of guns in the community. This is raising fear and increasing tensions among young people who may be affiliated with groups that engage in retributive violence. There is also a big gap when it comes to dialogue on drugs and drug policy, particularly as related to violence.

There are opportunities for more proactive prevention with the justice system, including alternative-sentencing efforts and helping people transition out of justice systems. But there was a sense that the City Council is not sufficiently connected to the reality of the problem, and that generally, more knowledge is needed about evidence-informed solutions. If people only know about police solutions, those are the only solutions that will be offered, even if they are not the best solutions and may be replicating harm.

There was also a note that caretakers in the community have little support themselves. This leads to burnout and exhaustion and is harmful at the individual and family levels.

## **Academic Partners**

On the final day of the exchange, the team visited the University of the West of England to learn more about the local academic capacities to support public safety. The visit started with a trip to the Police Simulation Unit, which helps to train incoming police cadets using simulated public and private spaces, as well as a simulated courtroom to train cadets to be able to deliver evidence for cases taken to prosecution.

The exchange group also met with a research team that has been exploring the local applicability of an OVP in Bristol, including with support from a small Peace Incentive Fund grant offered by Peace in Our Cities. The research team, which includes criminologists and other specialists, took the opportunity to learn more about how Oakland's DVP is positioned in the city, including in relation to the police, and how it balances prevention and targeted intervention. The discussion also covered the importance of data tracking and getting political buy-in and support to ensure there is cohesion and not duplication with other services.

Taking advantage of a unique opportunity, one member of the academic team began a scholar-in-residence fellowship with EFC starting in early 2026 to help support the growth of a research-and-knowledge arm for the organization.

## **Additional Meetings**

Individual meetings were held with the EFC staff working on monitoring and evaluation. In this discussion, EFC discussed its tools for data collection and also areas where it is looking to strengthen its collection and analysis capacity.

A meeting was also held with a former commander at the Avon and Somerset Police. The conversation was primarily informal to discuss the idea of an OVP and how it could help balance law enforcement with social-prevention efforts.

The exchange team also connected with the "power of place" and long history of the fight for civil rights and antiracism in Bristol, visiting key areas of the city that inform and shape its current challenges and opportunities. This included visiting the M Shed Museum, with exhibits that capture the civic memory of Bristol, including how its people have protested for their rights and against racism in a city with a history tied to the transatlantic trafficking and enslavement of Africans. Since March 2024, the statue of Edward Colston (1636–1821), a slave trader and city benefactor, has been displayed at the M Shed, "lying horizontally and still covered in graffiti, in a permanent exhibition on the power of protest." During the June 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in Bristol, antiracism activists had pulled Colston's statue from its original plinth, toppling it and subsequently rolling it across town and into the harbor.

## What Is an Office of Violence Prevention?

### Lessons from Global Efforts to Coordinate Violence Reduction in Communities

Violence is highly concentrated in cities. And in recent decades, cities have gained more political and fiscal autonomy from central governments, making local elected officials the main focus of societal demands to prevent and reduce violence. As a result, many municipalities have created or supported offices of violence prevention (OVPs), which are local-level governmental, civil-society-run, or public-private entities whose central mandate is to prevent different forms of violence. A report by Peace in Our Cities (PiOC) shows that the range of violence prevention options for OVPs is large and varied. These offices vary in institutional design, resources, and challenges, but all those reviewed in the report do not rely primarily on law enforcement. The report identifies key elements that commonly feature in effective OVPs, gathering insights, tradeoffs, and lessons in urban-violence prevention. These findings can help inform policymakers, stakeholders, and policy experts on urban-violence prevention to set up effective OVPs or draw lessons for existing violence-prevention structures and initiatives. Read more in the report, [Lessons from Effective Offices of Violence Prevention](#).

## What We Learned: Key Takeaways from the Exchange and Way Forward

### Community Partnership Is Key, But So Is Government Allyship

Throughout the exchange there was a continued sense that while EFC is deeply embedded in its community, a range of other actors in Bristol serve similar and different communities. Planning for a citywide prevention effort needs to factor in all the various community-based organizations and actors who have reach, legitimacy, and voice. The Oakland DVP spoke about its role as a convener across community groups, using its government position to bring people together and to partner, but not to dominate and control. One way the DVP helps advance this role is as a funder, providing support to community-based organizations to help them grow and thrive in their work. This is possible because of a voter-approved tax and parking surcharge revenue stream that funds public safety in Oakland.

At the same time, in order to advance the idea and development of an OVP in Bristol, it was clear that political buy-in and leadership was also key. Indeed, the launching of the DVP in Oakland emerged from a powerful marriage of community demand and political leadership, a marriage that recognized the imperative of investing both in community and the public sector, while ensuring that one side isn't neglected in favor of the other. Understanding power dynamics at play is crucial, requiring deep listening that respects voices that have historically been drowned out or marginalized.

## **Get Your Focus and Goals Right**

“From the start, develop a rigorous diagnosis to have a clear baseline, formulate strategic priorities, and guide interventions. Regularly update diagnoses as conditions and problems change.” —PiOC OVP Report

It is crucial for any citywide effort to be clear and focused on its objectives from the start. The setting of objectives must be informed by the deep listening and partner feedback articulated above. But it also must be based on data. Oakland has three specific and clear goals, which have been developed with community and informed by a problem analysis. A problem analysis is a methodological tool to help focus on the specific dynamics of violence, the individuals most at risk of harming and being harmed, the factors that are facilitating violence to continue, and the way that violence spreads. A recommendation coming out of the exchange was that Bristol invest in conducting its own problem analysis to help inform its strategy from the start.

Having a problem analysis can also be extremely useful in setting a baseline, which is key for regular monitoring and evaluation, to make sure that the investment and energy is having the desired impact. This was another recommendation: really investing in learning from the work while understanding that a reduction in physical violence alone may not be—indeed, for EFC is not—the only barometer of success.

Doing the diagnostic and goal-setting work from the start will also help in articulating how far upstream an OVP adaptation in Bristol wants to be. Too far upstream and the impacts may not be realized in a short-term way. Too much focused on response, and preventive capacity may be neglected. This can be informed by and advanced through the process of problem analysis and deep listening.

## **Don't Create a False Dichotomy of Working Short or Long Term**

Oakland partners in particular spoke a lot about the priority of addressing serious violence taking place today and addressing the structural and causal factors influencing violence. In discussion, the group reinforced the point that it is not only possible, but imperative, to do both. This is partly because the ways violence is responded to in the short term can influence longer-term dynamics. And because for meaningful trust and engagement, the longer-term structural factors cannot be excluded from discussion or prioritization. Appreciating the synchronicity here advances the work in a virtuous circle, while reinforcing a binary creates a vicious circle.

## **Intentionally Incorporate Awareness of Intersections of GBV with Community-Violence Work**

Gender-based violence informs and influences not only preexisting risk factors for harm but also the proximate or acute behaviors that inflict harm. The preconditioned norms around gender, the power dynamics that inform ideas of gender, the expectations around gender roles—all of these factors influence violence writ large and should, therefore, be factored into both analysis and programming. And yet, almost always, gendered violence is understood as separate from and treated differently than

other forms of interpersonal or community violence. In order to not just treat the symptoms of harm and violence but to interrupt cycles of violence, recognition of the intersection between gender-based violence and community violence is essential. All interventions that focus on community violence should incorporate gender-based violence in order to create sustained change for those impacted by violence and alter societal norms around acceptable forms of violence.

## **Take Care of All the People**

Finally, quite a bit of conversation centered on caring for the carers. Making sure to give space, support, and mentoring to team members who are doing this work. What is needed can look different to different people, but having the human-resource and management capacity to support and uplift is essential for those doing this challenging work. This was reinforced in particular given how many young people are engaged who themselves have been impacted by the forms of harm and violence they are now working to treat.

Central to this idea is how to value and support those with lived experiences of harm in their roles as staff working to prevent harm against others. There has been an important and valuable shift in recognizing the need to hire staff members with lived experience of harm in programs and efforts to reduce such harm. But this can also trap individual staff members in having to continuously repeat their own personal stories of transformation, rather than being valued and recognized for all that they bring to the role beyond a singular personal narrative. Organizations need to be intentional with their staff to avoid falling into these traps and uplift the innate strengths, resilience, and value of all staff regardless of lived experience or education level.

# Annex

## Meeting Participants

**Martin Bisp**, Co-Founder and Executive Director for Global Partnerships and Impact, Empire Fighting Chance (EFC)

**Helen Godwin**, Mayor for the West of England

**Emily Haberfield**, Head of Funding, EFC

**Holly Joshi**, Chief, Oakland Department of Violence Prevention

**Megan Knowelden**, Community Outreach Manager, EFC

**Sam Kotadia**, Head of Psychology, EFC

**Rachel Locke**, Cofounder and Principal, Peace in Our Cities (PiOC)

**Jennifer Mendonca**, Community Coach and Operations Assistant, EFC

**Clare Moody**, Police and Crime Commissioner, Avon and Somerset

**Kelsey Paul Shantz**, PiOC Secretariat and Program Officer, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

**Lord Marvin Rees**, former Mayor of Bristol and Member of the House of Lords

**Sara Serin-Christ**, Gender-Based Violence Program Planner, Oakland Department of Violence Prevention

**Matt Webster**, Head of Programs, EFC

**Courtney Young**, Community Outreach Manager, EFC