



An Interim Evaluation of Oakland's Measure Z–Funded Services

Community Members' Perceptions of Crime, Safety, and Services

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Understanding community members' perspectives of and experiences with violence is important to identifying safety concerns and designing effective interventions.

Residents can offer information about their neighborhood conditions, familiarity with local services, and experiences with those services, all of which are relevant to violence prevention strategies. Surveying community members is also another way to measure levels of victimization, as many crimes are never reported and therefore not included in official crime statistics. To that end, hearing from residents of Oakland, California, about their experiences with crime and services is valuable for assessing how strategies funded by Measure Z have been implemented.

This brief presents interim findings on Oakland residents' views on safety and violence from data collected by the Urban Institute, in partnership with Urban Strategies Council, through process and impact evaluations of Measure Z–funded initiatives over a three-year period from July 2022 to June 2025 (box 1). Engaging with affected communities through formal surveys, interviews, and incidental interactions allows researchers to glean the root causes of trends observed through other data sources (Walby et al. 2017). This is particularly important for issues like crime and its causes, which are topics of ongoing debate, as explanations can be unique to particular cities, neighborhoods, and even city blocks. Individuals' perceptions of violent crime are often out of step with official crime statistics (Duffy et al. 2008). One possible explanation is that traditional statistics abstract away from the local drivers of crime and generally offer information about *what* crimes are happening rather than *why* they

are happening. Creating opportunities for community members to directly express their attitudes about crime and safety provides critical insight to those determined to stem violence and address its root causes.

BOX 1

Measure Z and the Department of Violence Prevention

In 2014, Oakland voters passed Measure Z, the Public Safety and Services Violence Prevention Act. Measure Z built on lessons from the earlier Measure Y, the Violence Prevention and Public Safety Act of 2004. Measure Z provides approximately \$27 million in funding annually, with \$2 million designated for improving fire-response services, about \$15 million for violence-reduction efforts within the Oakland Police Department, and roughly \$10 million for violence prevention and intervention programs overseen, and in some cases directly provided, by the Department of Violence Prevention (DVP). Measure Z-funded DVP activities are grouped into four strategy areas: group violence response, gender-based violence response, community healing and restoration, and school VIP (violence intervention and prevention) teams that embed the other three strategy areas in select Oakland schools.

Established in 2017, the DVP has a mandate to reduce gun violence, intimate partner violence, and commercial sexual exploitation. Before the DVP was established, the community-led components of the City of Oakland's violence-reduction work were housed in Oakland Unite. Oakland Unite was a division of the City's human services department, and the DVP absorbed its functions and staff were automatically transferred from Oakland Unite to the DVP. The roles and responsibilities of Oakland Unite were fully assumed by the DVP in 2020, and the DVP also took on new functions.

Source: *Department of Violence Prevention Strategic Spending Plan, 22-24* (City of Oakland, Department of Violence Prevention, 2021).

The DVP is committed to applying “a public health approach to violence prevention focused on community-led intervention.”¹ The DVP can improve not only the services it provides to address these issues through community-led interventions, but how services are delivered, by hearing from Oakland residents. To help the DVP achieve this, the evaluation team carried out two efforts to collect data on Oakland residents' perceptions of safety: a community survey administered to hundreds of Oakland residents at DVP-sponsored events and observations collected and aggregated from local community meetings attended by city officials and motivated residents. Though these survey results and council-meeting observations offer only a snapshot of Oakland residents' familiarity and experience with DVP services, they provide an early sign of how and where the department is making its presence felt, which populations it is serving, and where there is room for growth.

Community Survey

The evaluation team conducted the first community survey wave in 2023 at Town Nights events. Town Nights are large community gatherings organized by Oakland community-based organizations

with Measure Z funding from the DVP in local parks and community centers on summer Friday nights. These events provide safe, positive spaces for community members to come together, build relationships, and promote peace and stability while learning about and accessing resources made available by city agencies, including DVP-funded services. As Town Nights are purposely located in areas where issues with crime and violence are most prevalent, surveying Oakland residents attending them likewise engages Oaklanders most affected by violence at the community level, if not directly (the people who Measure Z-supported activities are primarily intended to benefit).

The first survey wave was administered by researchers and community fellows from Urban Strategies Council at Town Nights events over four consecutive weeks in June and July 2023. To ensure the survey reached a broad cross-section of Oakland residents, it was administered in eight parks across the city and was offered in English, Spanish, Mandarin, and Arabic to Town Nights attendees 18 or older. Participants who completed the survey were offered \$50 Visa gift cards.

The survey was completed by 400 adult Oakland residents. Table 1 shows demographic information as reported by respondents. Thirty-three percent of participants identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 32 percent as Black, and 21 percent as Hispanic or Latinx. Almost half identified as female and just over one-third as male, and 3 percent identified as nonbinary/nonconforming. Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 87; one-third of respondents were 18 to 34 and one-quarter were 25 to 54. It should be noted that the survey participants are not representative of Oakland's general population across all demographic and geographic measures, largely because we intentionally recruited in areas most affected by serious violence. Some racial/ethnic groups, such as Asian and Black people, are overrepresented in our survey data.

TABLE 1
Survey Participant Demographics
N=400

	% of respondents	% of Oakland population
Race/ ethnicity		
Asian / Pacific Islander	33	16
Black	32	22
Hispanic/Latinx	21	27
Native American / Indigenous	6	<1
White	5	29
Other	9	NA
Not reported	14	NA
Zip code of residence		
94607	19	6
94603	11	8
94608	10	NA
94601	8	12
94606	8	9
94621	8	8
94612	5	4
Other	13	49
Not reported	20	NA

	% of respondents	% of Oakland population
Age		
18-24	16	7
25-34	17	20
35-44	12	16
45-54	13	12
55-64	10	11
64+	10	14
Not reported	21	NA
Gender/sex		
Male	36	49
Female	48	51
Nonbinary/Nonconforming	3	NA
Not reported	14	NA

Sources: Urban Institute analysis of survey data collected by Urban Strategies Council in June and July 2023; US Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-year 2017-2021 estimates for Oakland, California.

Notes: NA = not applicable. Participants could indicate more than one race or ethnicity. The 94608 zip code contains parts of Oakland and Emeryville.

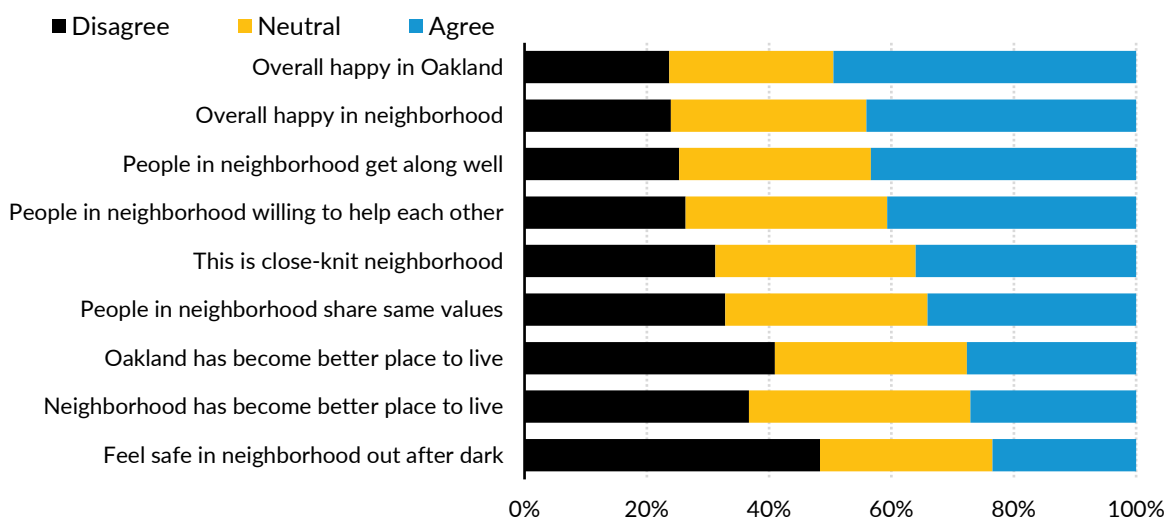
Community Survey Findings

Respondents' perceptions of crime, safety, and well-being in their neighborhoods were mixed. Half reported that they were happy in Oakland, but only a quarter reported that they felt safe in their neighborhoods after dark (figure 1). Respondents' views of relationships and togetherness in their neighborhoods were also mixed. More respondents agreed than disagreed that people in their neighborhoods got along well and were willing to help each other. However, more people disagreed than agreed that Oakland and their neighborhoods have become better places to live.

FIGURE 1

Oakland Residents' Views of Their Neighborhoods

How do you view your neighborhood?



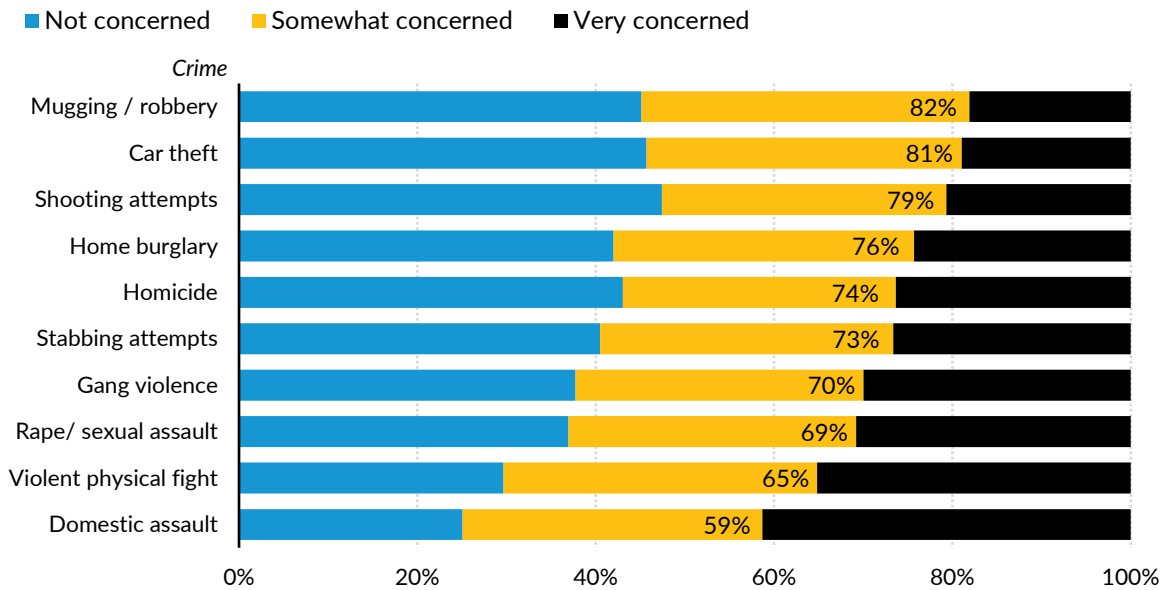
Source: Urban Institute analysis of survey data collected by Urban Strategies Council in June and July 2023.

Survey responses show that Oakland residents have a high degree of concern about their personal safety. Consistent with the earlier observation on fear of crime after dark, the vast majority of participants were somewhat or very concerned about becoming a victim of many types of crimes. They were most concerned about becoming a victim of a mugging or robbery (82 percent), car theft (81 percent), or a shooting (79 percent; figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Oakland Residents' Concerns About Victimization

In your daily routine, how concerned are you about becoming a victim of any of the following crimes?

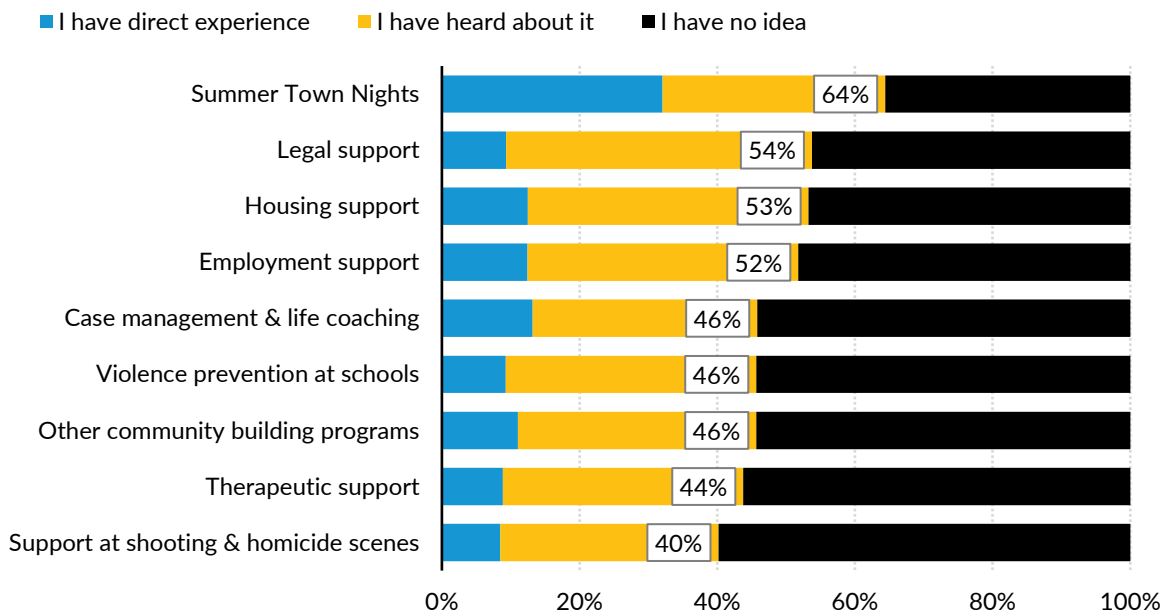


Source: Urban Institute analysis of survey data collected by Urban Strategies Council in June and July 2023.

The survey included items designed to capture respondents' knowledge of and exposure to public services targeted at violence intervention and prevention. Respondents were asked about their direct interactions with DVP-funded services and their overall perceptions of the accessibility of DVP services in their community. Respondents had a high-level awareness of many DVP-funded services. Given that these surveys were conducted at DVP-sponsored events, respondents' awareness of services was almost certainly higher than among Oakland residents generally. Still, these results offer instructive insight into how the DVP and its community partners are making their violence prevention and intervention work a visible presence for Oakland residents. The DVP appears to be reaching a majority of respondents either by providing direct support or through word of mouth (figure 3). Further, most residents were at least familiar with legal (54 percent), housing (53 percent), and employment-support (52 percent) services.

FIGURE 3

Oakland Residents' Experience with and Knowledge of DVP-Funded Services



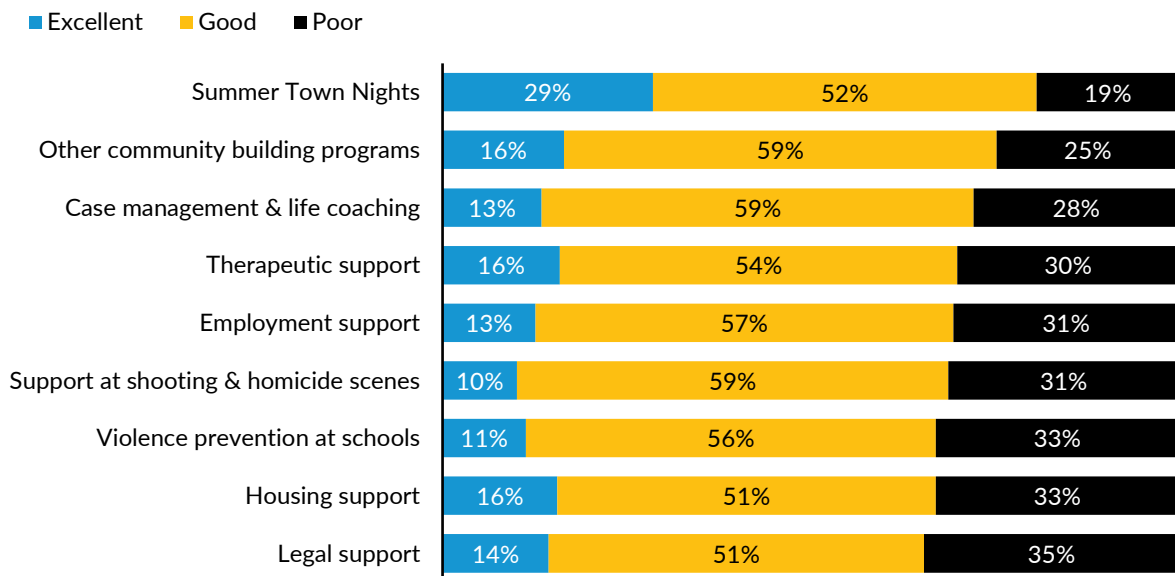
Source: Urban Institute analysis of survey data collected by Urban Strategies Council in June and July 2023.

Notes: DVP = Department of Violence Prevention. Percentages in boxes are the percentages of residents who had experience with or had heard about the events.

Perhaps more importantly, respondents had a generally positive view of the DVP's services. Among residents who had direct experience with or some general awareness of DVP services, perceptions were generally positive. Larger shares of respondents rated DVP-sponsored events positively (such as Town Nights and other community-building programs) compared with DVP-funded services (such as legal, housing, and employment-support services). This is also notable in that, with the exception of Town Nights, residents tended to be more familiar or had more direct experience with DVP-funded support services than DVP-sponsored programming and activities, though the overall approval numbers for each service are within a 16-percentage-point band (figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Oakland Residents' Perceptions of DVP-Funded Services



Source: Urban Institute analysis of survey data collected by Urban Strategies Council in June and July 2023.

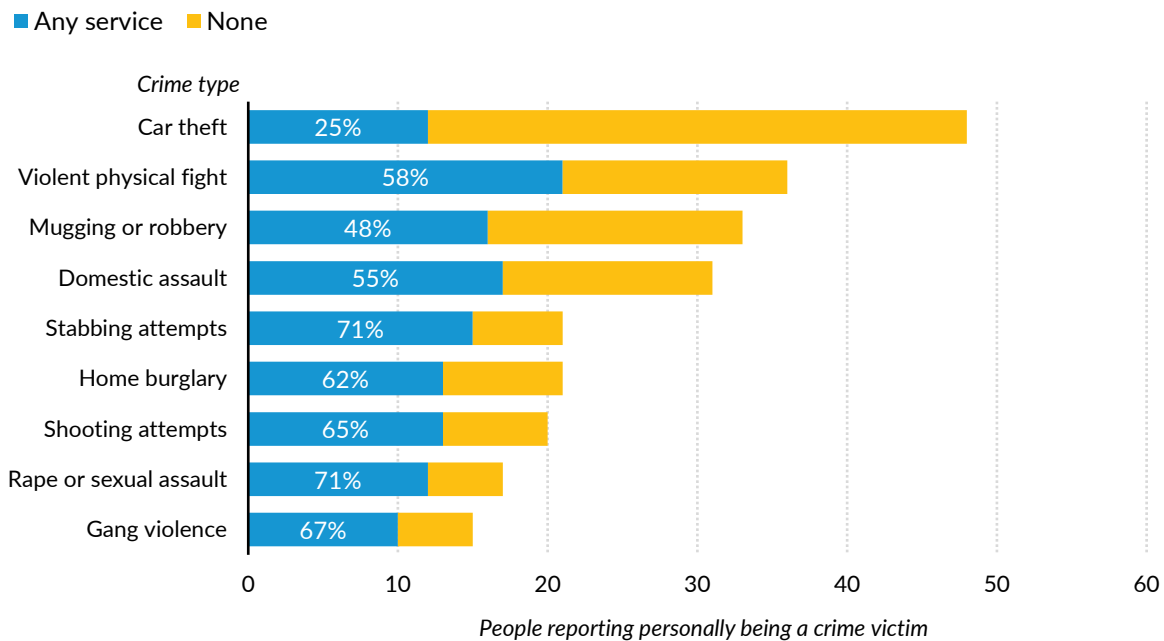
Note: DVP = Department of Violence Prevention.

We also asked residents to reflect on their own experiences with crime and violence and the extent of public services they received in response to crime. Many had been personally affected by violence. Over a quarter of respondents (26 percent) reported experiencing a violent crime in the past year, or a rate of 26,000 per 100,000. We can compare overall victimization numbers in Oakland with similarly sized western cities. According to the 2022 National Crime Victimization Survey, residents in mid-sized western cities (i.e., those with populations of 250,000 to 499,999) reported a violent victimization rate of 26.7 per 100,000 (Bureau of Justice Statistics n.d.). Though this evaluation used a different survey methodology and the community survey respondents are not representative of Oakland residents generally, these responses suggest that the Town Nights events (where residents were surveyed) are connecting with people who are being directly affected by violence, as intended.

Provision of victim services in response to violent incidents goes a long way in helping people feel safe in their communities. For most of crime types addressed by the survey, the majority of survey respondents who had been victimized had received services in response to that victimization. Rates of victim service receipt ranged from 48 percent of muggings/robberies to 71 percent of the time if victimized for rape or sexual assault or a stabbing attempt (figure 5). In comparison, under 10 percent of respondents to the National Crime Victimization Survey reported having receiving assistance from a victim services provider in response to a violent victimization (Thompson and Tapp 2023). Although the survey data we collected in Oakland and the Bureau of Justice Statistics' survey data are not entirely comparable because of the surveys' different methodologies, the findings do suggest that Oakland residents access victim services at a rate substantially higher than the national average.

Regarding the types of services received, for people who reported being victims of violent crimes, medical treatment for bodily injuries was the service they most commonly reported receiving, followed by housing support and therapeutic support. Victims of property crimes, such as car theft and home burglary, reported receiving therapeutic and legal support.

FIGURE 5
Oakland Residents' Reported Receipt of Victim Services by Crime Type



Source: Urban Institute analysis of survey data collected by Urban Strategies Council in June and July 2023.

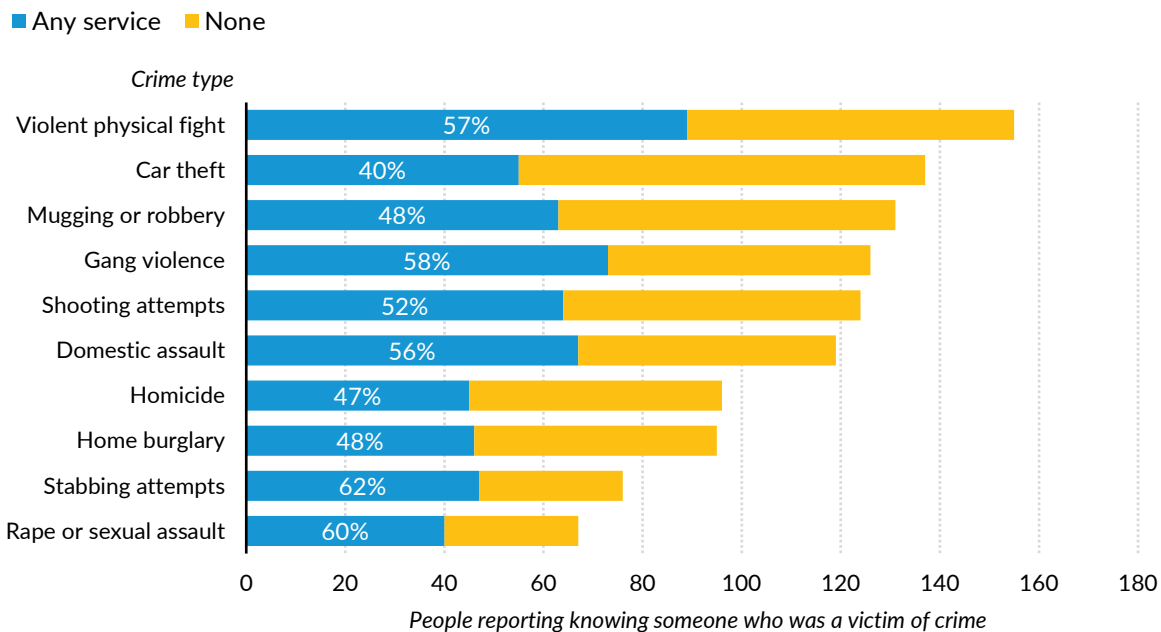
Note: People could report being victims of multiple crime types.

The survey also asked respondents about their perceptions of the experiences of people they know, as vicarious victimization (trauma a person experiences from knowledge of victimization experienced by others) has a large impact on people's sense of safety. Supporting victims of crime ties into the DVP's goal of instilling in people the confidence that they can live without fear of violence or crime. Respondents who reported knowing people who had been victims of crime said those victims received services about half the time. For all crime types observed, between 40 percent and 62 percent of respondents reported that those who had been victimized received some form of service (figure 6). Observed intervention rates were highest for interpersonal violent crimes, such as stabbing attempts (62 percent) and physical fights (57 percent), and for rape or sexual assault (60 percent), while intervention rates were lower for theft and burglary. We also observed that residents were more likely to know someone who had experienced car theft, physical violence, or gang violence than rape or sexual assault, though this may owe in part to stigma and other barriers to reporting gender-based violence (Wieberneit et al. 2024).

FIGURE 6

Receipt of Victim Services among Victims Known to Oakland Residents

Number of participants who knew someone who was a crime victim and whether they received services by crime type



Source: Urban Institute analysis of survey data collected by Urban Strategies Council in June and July 2023.

Observations of Neighborhood Council Meetings

For a more holistic understanding of what is driving these responses and to learn about what motivates Oakland residents to attend community events, researchers and community fellows from Urban Strategies Council attended neighborhood council meetings in eight Oakland neighborhoods where Town Nights were held. These meetings provide open-ended forums where concerned citizens can raise concerns, speak with city officials, and provide feedback for ongoing city initiatives.

At these meetings, Urban Strategies Council staff took notes on common themes, general topics discussed, and local priorities as articulated by attendees. These meetings were open to the public, and officials from the Oakland Police Department, neighborhood council staff, and other officials were encouraged to attend to both pose and respond to questions and concerns. These meetings were held either on Zoom, in person, or in a hybrid format and lasted up to 90 minutes. Agendas were determined ahead of time, but residents and other community stakeholders were encouraged to ask questions and suggest topics for future meetings. Though not focused on DVP-funded activities, the discussions in these meetings provide a useful complement to the survey findings in understanding Oakland residents' views of safety issues.

Among the most salient issues for meeting attendees were homelessness, car theft and carjackings, and trash pickup. As residents identified issues to discuss, meeting organizers led constructive conversations about how to address those issues, who the responsible parties were, and what direct action neighborhood council staff and other city officials could take to ameliorate the issues. Meetings concluded with announcements from organizers and residents about upcoming events, future council initiatives, and goals and agenda items for future meetings.

Though observers did not note any explicit mentions of the DVP, several DVP-related services and initiatives were discussed at the meetings. DVP-sponsored events, such as Town Nights, were promoted, including details on how to attend and what purpose they served. Issues of housing and employment support were also common topics, indicating that the concerns prioritized by DVP projects are being allocated toward issues of concern for Oakland residents. At nearly every meeting, attendees brought up issues of community violence and ongoing efforts to combat violence. City employees, including members of the OPD, described ongoing interagency efforts to stem violence at its root while promoting general community health and well-being. Overall, these meetings reflected the diverse priorities of different neighborhoods but also suggest that residents are not drawing a direct line between the issues they identify and the DVP services available to address those issues.

There are some limitations to the representativeness of the topics covered at the neighborhood council meetings. As with our survey respondents, attendees were not representative of the broader Oakland population or the populations of specific neighborhoods. Observations should be taken as representative only of those engaged community members who attended meetings to express concerns about issues affecting their lives and livelihoods and may not represent those who are less reliant on or involved with Oakland services, including those provided by the DVP. These meetings may also have been less accessible to residents with work or family-care obligations that make attendance difficult, a barrier to community engagement faced by local governments across the country (Farkas 2023).

Next Steps

A final evaluation report will complement the findings on community perceptions in this brief with results of the second community survey wave conducted in summer 2024. The evaluation team will compare the results across the two survey waves to capture changes in residents' perceptions of neighborhood conditions, safety, and services available in Oakland. That report will be completed and publicly released in the summer of 2025.

Note

¹ "Department of Violence Prevention," City of Oakland, accessed September 13, 2024, <https://www.oaklandca.gov/departments/violence-prevention>.

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