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A SPENDING SPREE TO EASE CITY'S SHOOTING SPREE

Chicago police investigate in June after an 11-year-old girl was shot in the 117000 block of South Michigan Avenue, in the West Pullman neighborhood.

TYLER LARIVIÈRE/SUN-TIMES



With neighborhoods becoming more dangerous, Chicago doubles down with \$411 million on a safety plan that was unveiled more than a year ago and has shown few results so far

BY DAVID STRUETT,
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The fatal shooting of a University of Chicago graduate near campus last month brought outcries from City Hall to the statehouse as Chicago's gun violence once again commanded public attention.

Lawmakers declared a public health crisis in the days after Shaoxiong Zheng was killed on Nov. 9. Community leaders demanded emergency measures, roundtables were organized, town meetings were held.

As those discussions continue, with no timetable set, the Lightfoot administration is planning to pump

more than \$400 million into its own community safety plan that targets 15 of the city's most violent community areas.

The plan, "Our City, Our Safety," was unveiled more than a year ago and has produced few results so far, according to crime data kept by the Sun-Times that shows many of those communities have gotten more dangerous.

The mayor told the newspaper she is hoping the unprecedented level of spending over the next two years will eventually narrow the "safety gap" by concentrating on violence prevention, street outreach, affordable housing, job training, health and wellness, and community development.

"We may not call all of these things part of the tools of public safety, but they absolutely fundamentally are," the mayor said in an interview. "Because when people are healthy, when communities are vibrant, when folks feel like they have ownership of the geography under their feet, communities thrive."

"That's why the investments we proposed to make over the next few years are so important. This is our WPA moment," she added, referring to the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal program that funded major public works projects across the country during the depths of the Great Depression.

While experts in the field ap-

plauded the steep rise in spending, they questioned how the money will be tracked and used, and how the administration will maintain such high levels of funding over the years it will take to put a sizable dent in a crime rate that has risen for two straight years.

Since the money is being invested in dozens of programs run by groups throughout the city, it will be important to assess how their work reduces violence, according to Kim Smith, a director at the University of Chicago Crime Lab.

"This level of investment in violence prevention is unprecedented

and so important given the enormous toll of gun violence in Chicago," Smith said. "It's also important to be clear about the theory of change behind each of these investments."

For example, introducing an alternate response for 911 calls involving mental health issues, as the city is doing, will only be effective if those freed-up police resources are deployed to address gun violence.

Others noted that over 70% of the city's violence prevention budget through 2024 is funded by federal American Rescue Plan money, a one-time stimulus shot.



Kim Smith



ABOVE: University of Chicago students protest for campus safety following the murder of graduate student Shaoxiong Zheng in November. **MARK CAPAPAS/SUN-TIMES**

RIGHT: Chicago police walk near a deflated bounce-house while investigating a shooting in September in which three people were wounded, including a 12-year-old boy and a 15-year-old girl, near the site of a back-to-school event in the East Garfield Park neighborhood.

TYLER LARIVIERE/SUN-TIMES

"They're not going to continue the funding," said Professor Lance Williams with Northeastern Illinois University's Urban Studies Department. "It's unfortunate because we see it's needed."

The mayor acknowledged the challenges but would not say what happens when the federal money runs out. "You've got to be flexible, you've got to adapt, you've got to be constantly evaluating what works," Lightfoot said.

That may mean adopting some of the ideas that have been floated so far during the community meetings, like better witness protection or more detectives or mental health "tactical units."

Lightfoot said she's heard "a couple things" that she thought were good ideas but would not elaborate. "We've got to go to these communities, talk with them about what their needs are, what their pain points are."



Critical questions'

The budget drafted by Lightfoot and approved by the City Council contains \$411.6 million to implement "Our City, Our Safety."

- ◆ \$85 million on violence intervention, including victim services, street outreach and other violence reduction programs.

- ◆ \$62 million for affordable housing and homeless programs.

- ◆ \$80 million for assistance to families and youth jobs.

- ◆ \$40 million for health and wellness programs.

- ◆ \$114.6 million for community development and parks.

- ◆ \$30 million for small business.

The funding reflects the plan's "holistic approach" to reducing violence by improving communities. Specifically, it targets community

areas where poverty, low educational attainment and poor health outcomes, including shorter life expectancy, are concentrated.

These neighborhoods have accounted for 50% of the violence in Chicago over the last three years, according to statistics cited in the plan.

But it has been difficult to gauge whether money spent so far has been going where it's needed most.

The city's list of investments under the plan was last updated in July. It shows more than \$50 million going to more than two dozen organizations for street outreach, victim services, transitional jobs, scholarships and domestic violence.

But more than half the money is not earmarked for any particular

neighborhood. And there is little information available on what exactly these groups are doing and how effective they've been.

City officials said a breakdown of 2022 investments will be released early next year. Lightfoot said the new spending will be guided by pilot programs conducted this summer in about a dozen of the city's nearly 280 police patrol beats.

The programs involved are "really doing an asset audit and finding out demographically what is going on in these communities," the mayor said.

"What are the job and poverty levels? How many youth are in these areas? What are the programs being utilized, being supported by philanthropy in these areas?" Lightfoot said.

"We were seeing pre-COVID levels of homicides and shooting reductions," the mayor said, though she acknowledged, "Not across the board."

A Sun-Times analysis of those beats found that just three saw shootings drop compared to 2019, while 12 reported increases. The number of people shot in five of the beats more than doubled.

Lightfoot said the pilot programs were used to "scale up and build our Community Safety Coordination Center," which shares information among city agencies and nonprofit groups that work in neighborhoods.

Tamara Mahal was installed in July as chief coordination officer of the center. She led the city's distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and, before that, served as an assistant aviation commissioner overseeing safety and emergency management.

Like the mayor, Mahal said it's important that the city's efforts be driven by data.

"We know there are strategies that have worked in other cities we could apply here, and we know we have successful strategies here we can expand," Mahal said. "These are critical questions we're asking now and we'll continue to ask."

Challenges ahead

So far, the data shows violence has not decreased in most of the communities targeted by the mayor's safety plan.

Fatal shootings are higher in 10 of the 15 community areas: East Garfield Park, West Pullman, North

Lawndale, Greater Grand Crossing, Auburn Gresham, Englewood, Roseland, Chatham, South Shore and Chicago Lawn.

Only the Austin area measured about the same as last year. Four are better: South Lawndale, West Garfield Park, Humboldt Park and West Englewood.

The numbers are far worse when you look at fatal shootings since 2019, before the pandemic: West Pullman, 450% higher, North Lawndale, 104% higher, East Garfield Park, 100% higher.

The numbers reflect the steady rise in gun violence across the city over the last two years.

Chicago has seen about 4% more homicides this year than this time last year, and 61% more than the same period in 2019. At least 4,300 people have been shot, 7% above the same time last year and almost 70% above the same time frame in 2019.

An evaluation of the effectiveness of "Our City, Our Safety" is being conducted with the help of Northwestern University, but the results are not expected to be published until sometime early next year.

Low marks could make it hard to keep spending so much money on the plan after the federal funds run out, especially if violent crime continues to rise.

Adding to the challenges, the mayor has struggled to keep key people involved in crafting the plan and carrying it out.

The chief author of the plan was Susan Lee, who had extensive experience working with community outreach groups before becoming deputy mayor of public safety. She quit after the report was released at the end of 2019.

In early November, Norman Kerr left his post as director of violence reduction at City Hall to work in the private sector. He has not been replaced.

"We're going to be adapting, looking at challenges," Lightfoot said, adding that she hoped the city would continue "to look at these longstanding problems squarely in the eye and not shy away from taking them on ... This is our opportunity to really change the trajectory of our city fundamentally."

Andy Boyle contributed the data analysis for this report.