



SNUG Outreach Worker Survey: Research Brief

Academic Partner:

New York State Youth Justice
Institute

University at Albany
School of Criminal Justice

Project Completed:

March 2023

Brief Issued

February 2024

Summary

The Division of Criminal Justice Services partnered with the [Youth Justice Institute](#) and University at Albany School of Criminal Justice to understand the demographics, histories of trauma, and working conditions of employees who work for the SNUG Street Outreach program.

Please [email the Research Consortium](#) for more information about this project or to learn more about the Consortium.

Background

The [SNUG Street Outreach program](#) is an evidence-based, violence reduction initiative implemented by New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) in 2009 to respond to gun violence using a [public health approach](#): identify its source, interrupt the transmission, and treat individuals and communities affected by the violence.

Street outreach workers connect with those at highest risk of perpetrating and/or becoming victims of gun violence to reduce high-risk behavior and mentor youth involved with the program to set goals and connect them with educational and job opportunities and other services. They also mediate conflicts, and intervene to prevent violent incidents and retaliation immediately after a shooting occurs. Street outreach workers are considered credible messengers within their communities, as they often have similar lived experiences as those they assist, former criminal justice involvement or have lost loved ones to violence.

Researchers from the New York State Youth Justice Institute and the University at Albany School of Criminal Justice sought to gain insight into the professional and personal lives of outreach staff and their experiences working for SNUG.

The study aimed to document the demographic profile of the SNUG outreach staff statewide, and better understand the basic work conditions associated with the health and well-being of staff, exposure to violence and stress, and their relationship with the communities they serve.

Evaluation Overview

From March 2022 through March 2023, the research team:

- completed 95 [Violence Intervention Worker Study \(VleWS\)](#) surveys with outreach workers across 12 SNUG sites, representing 100 percent of the active workforce at the time of the surveys were administered;
- conducted a preliminary analysis of SNUG's centralized administrative dataset; and
- interviewed six SNUG staff regarding data collection, data use, and data needs

This brief summarizes findings from the VleWS surveys.

Violence Intervention Worker Study Surveys

Northwestern University, with research assistance from the University at Albany School of Criminal Justice, developed the VleWS survey to understand the professional and personal lives of community-based violence intervention staff. The survey captured outreach worker demographics and information on work conditions, exposure to violence and stress, home and neighborhood life, and relationships with the people and communities in which they work.

The survey was researcher-guided due to it having approximately 300 questions and to avoid a low response rate or poor data quality. Between the summer of 2022 and winter of 2023, all surveys were administered face-to-face after an informed consent, with the researcher and respondent alone in a

private room at the SNUG site.

The researcher read each question aloud to the worker, who followed along on a screen that displayed each survey question and the list of possible response options. The average completion time was 87 minutes.

Key Findings

1. The average SNUG outreach worker was 38 years old, African American (86 percent), male (84 percent) and had prior involvement in the criminal justice system, including incarceration (three times on average). Most were unmarried (78 percent), parents (85 percent) and had limited formal education: a high school diploma or GED (77 percent).
2. Most SNUG outreach staff have a history of arrest, incarceration, gang membership, and experience with guns.
3. SNUG outreach staff experienced high rates of direct exposure to violence on the job by being on scene after the shooting, being shot at, or witnessing a shooting. Additionally, they experienced the mental health consequences associated with working with traumatized participants, known as secondary traumatic stress.
4. A significant proportion of SNUG workers reported feelings of psychological distress in the week prior to taking the VIEWS survey, including symptoms of anxiety and depression.
5. SNUG workers generally expressed high levels of job satisfaction (65 percent) and viewed their outreach positions as being related to their long-term career goals (89 percent).
6. SNUG workers were well trained for their positions (86 percent) and felt supported by their supervisors, both in the field and in the overall course of work.
7. Various employment benefits, including health insurance, were offered to the SNUG workforce but workers expressed a high level of uncertainty around eligibility requirements and details of the available benefits.
8. Responses to survey questions about pay, savings, supplemental employment, and housing indicated that most SNUG outreach workers experienced some degree of financial hardship.

Key Recommendations for Improving the SNUG Social Work Initiative

1. Reevaluate the established hiring practices and the profile of the current workforce.
2. Ensure SNUG staff can access affordable health insurance
3. Develop an understanding of how and why outreach workers experienced financial hardship and develop organizational support to address specific needs
4. Develop proactive and practical options for reducing SNUG staff exposure to violence and experiences of secondary traumatic stress.

Recommendations

To encourage best practices, researchers recommended the following:

1. Reevaluate the established hiring practices and the profile of the current workforce.

Broaden the criteria for “credible messenger” and consider how a variety of individuals may improve intervention practice and expand SNUG’s capacity to connect with those involved in gun violence.

2. Ensure SNUG staff can access affordable health insurance

Confirm all staff have health insurance, especially those who believe they may be covered under Medicaid. The care and health of outreach staff should be prioritized, including ensuring access to mental health support services.

3. Develop an understanding of how and why outreach workers experienced financial hardship and develop organizational support to address specific needs

Given the prevalence of housing insecurity among SNUG workers, implementing housing-specific employee support systems, such as a rental deposit loan program, may help address this issue. DCJS also should identify the causes and consequences of staff securing outside employment beyond SNUG.

4. Develop proactive and practical options for reducing SNUG staff exposure to violence and experiences of secondary traumatic stress.

This should be done, however, without reducing the amount and quality of services provided to outreach participants and the community. DCJS can draw from best practices among first responders to improve onsite safety and apply those strategies to address the direct exposure outreach staff experience.