

Insights from Survivors of Gun Violence

Listening Initiative for a Survivor Network

Evaluation Report: Executive Summary

Gun violence continues to devastate communities across Chicago, taking lives and leaving survivors, especially parents and siblings, navigating profound grief, trauma, and systemic barriers. In partnership with BECOME, Purpose Over Pain (P.O.P.) launched the Listening Initiative to center survivor voices, better understand their needs, and build a survivor network rooted in lived experience.

Between January and March 2025, six restorative, culturally responsive focus groups were conducted with 51 survivors from Chicago's North and South Sides. Participants shared how they are coping and what meaningful support must look like.

Key Findings

- **RESILIENT GRIEVING:** Survivors reclaim joy and honor their loved ones by living fully, even as grief persists in a cyclical and exhausting way.
- **THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF PEER SUPPORT:** Survivor-led spaces provide vital emotional safety, belonging, and healing.
- **HEALING THROUGH HELPING OTHERS:** Many survivors found meaning in mentoring youth, supporting newly bereaved families, and using their experiences to help others navigate trauma.
- **SYSTEMIC FAILURES:** Survivors frequently faced institutional indifference, racialized assumptions, bureaucratic barriers, and a dehumanizing justice system. Many were forced to investigate their child's murder themselves, navigate fragmented services, and cope with financial devastation.
- **CRITICAL GAPS:** Siblings' needs are often overlooked; immediate and long-term financial, emotional, and legal supports are scarce.

Survivor Priorities

- **IMMEDIATE PRACTICAL AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT:** Immediate, holistic, and survivor-informed support, both practical and financial, is essential in the immediate aftermath of having a loved one taken by gun violence.
- **COMMUNITY-LED, COMPASSIONATE AND CONTINUED CONNECTION:** Participants emphasized the importance of peer connection and compassion, not only in the immediate aftermath of violence, but as an ongoing source of healing. Their vision challenges existing systems to shift from reactive, fragmented responses to sustained, community-rooted care led by those most directly impacted. Survivors called for a model of support that centers trust, lived experience, and mutual aid.

This Listening Initiative affirmed the deep wisdom of Purpose Over Pain’s approach and highlighted opportunities for further growth. P.O.P. already:

- Provides long-term, survivor-led support to hundreds of families.
- Connects survivors to funeral and basic needs assistance.
- Uplifts survivor voices through arts-based advocacy like Notes for Peace.
- Mobilizes survivors into leadership roles in advocacy, community safety, and system reform efforts.
- Reestablished a fathers’ support group in response to what was shared by the fathers who participated in the focus group.

Moving Forward

Survivors must lead the way. Purpose Over Pain’s model, survivor-led, culturally responsive, and community-rooted, offers a clear path toward healing, dignity, and justice. Sustained investment in survivor leadership and long-term support systems is critical to transforming how gun violence is addressed in Chicago and beyond.

