Baltimore has many assets—world-class hospitals, universities, institutions and sports franchises—but it is also one of the poorest jurisdictions in the state of Maryland. Many youth don’t believe that they will live to be 25 and that if they do, it will be spent behind bars. Homicide is the leading cause of death in Baltimore City among African-American men aged 15 to 24 years old, and our juvenile homicide rate is 8.4 times higher than the national rate. Youth violence is a significant public health challenge facing the city.

Safe Streets was launched by the Baltimore City Health Department in 2007, and it is the longest-running national replication site of the Cure Violence model. Safe Streets Baltimore works where violence is most acute, in communities where people are at the highest risk of being either victims or perpetrators of violence. Safe Streets is based on the Cure Violence model (formerly called CeaseFire Chicago) and follows this framework:

1. Identify brewing conflicts, retaliatory events, and those that are at highest risk for violence.
2. Intervene, mediate conflicts, and reduce the risk for those involved.
3. Alter behavior by changing how people think about violence, so it's no longer seen as a way to resolve conflicts.

An Effective Model

Our partners at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health evaluated the program, looking at more than nine years’ worth of data, and the results show that violence was significantly reduced.
CREDIBLE MESSENGERS

A central aspect of the success of Safe Streets is having the most effective people implement the model on the ground. Credible messengers are individuals who are of the community, people familiar with the history there, and have walked the walk and talked the talk. Many people who work at our Safe Streets sites are ex-offenders, and they talk about this as their opportunity to give back and stop the cycle of violence.

These individuals are outreach workers and violence interrupters, and their primary responsibilities are to detect when something is brewing, identify the individuals involved, and change behaviors. It’s a 24/7 job,
and for many, it’s a mission. When there’s a shooting, there’s a response that engages extended social networks and the entire community, so the interrupters mediate at these levels as well as with the individuals involved.

The Role of Public Health

We’ve seen reductions in shootings because the Safe Streets program acts in concert with traditional public health principles—changing social norms, reducing risk, and providing alternatives for violent behavior. Safe Streets is an institutional part of the department’s Office of Youth Violence Prevention, which has developed significant partnerships with various sectors since it was established in 2002. In addition to Safe Streets, the Office of Youth Violence Prevention runs Operation Safe Kids for adjudicated youth and Dating Matters, which conducts a curriculum in middle schools that promotes respectful, non-violent dating relationships.

The public health department also plays a role in addressing the environmental and structural factors of violence. For example, we’re working in collaboration with the planning department, the legal department and others throughout the city to reduce the density of alcohol outlets in the city via zoning changes as another way of reducing violent crimes.
As a pediatrician who has lived and worked in three major cities on the East Coast, I have seen first-hand the avoidable consequences of violence in urban centers. I am passionate about the central role public health must play in reducing violence in our communities. I hope what we are doing in Baltimore conveys a sense of the power of public health in preventing violence. Violence still continues to be a significant issue, but our homicide rate is the lowest it’s been since 1970. We know our efforts to reduce violence are having an impact.

Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth (UNITY) builds support for effective, sustainable efforts to prevent violence before it occurs, so urban youth can thrive in safe environments with ample opportunities and supportive relationships. A Prevention Institute initiative, UNITY is funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and in part by The Kresge Foundation. For more information, visit www.preventioninstitute.org/unity.