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THE JOHN F. FINN INSTITUTE
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Focused Deterrence Initiatives: A Synopsis

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The John F. Finn Institute for Public Safety, Inc., is an independent, not-for-profit and non-partisan corporation, whose work is dedicated to the development of criminal justice strategies, programs, and practices that are effective, lawful, and procedurally fair, through the application of social science findings and methods. The Institute conducts social research on matters of public safety and security – crime, public disorder, and the management of criminal justice agencies and partnerships – in collaboration with municipal, county, state, and federal criminal justice agencies, and for their direct benefit. The findings of the Institute’s research are also disseminated through other media to criminal justice professionals, academicians, elected public officials, and other interested parties, so that those findings may contribute to a broader body of knowledge about criminal justice and to the practical application of those findings in other settings.

The Finn Institute was established in 2007, building on a set of collaborative projects and relationships with criminal justice agencies dating to 1998. The first of those projects, for which we partnered with the Albany Police Department (APD), was initiated by John Finn, who was at that time the sergeant who commanded the APD’s Juvenile Unit. Later promoted to lieutenant and assigned to the department’s Administrative Services Bureau, he spearheaded efforts to implement problem-oriented policing, and to develop an institutional capability for analysis that would support problem-solving. The APD’s capacity for applying social science methods and results thereupon expanded exponentially, based on Lt. Finn’s appreciation for the value of research, his keen aptitude for analysis, and his vision of policing, which entailed the formulation of proactive, data-driven, and – as needed – unconventional strategies to address problems of public safety. Lt. Finn was fatally shot in the line of duty in 2003. The Institute that bears his name honors his life and career by fostering the more effective use of research and analysis within criminal justice agencies, just as Lt. Finn did in the APD.

Introduction

Focused deterrence – also known as “lever-pulling” – is a matter of enhancing the threat of criminal sanctions for the highest-risk offenders and deliberately communicating that threat in order to maximize its impact on offenders’ behavior. Research has repeatedly shown that a small number of offenders account for a disproportionately large volume of violent crime.¹ Further, violence is often concentrated in specific neighborhoods. By focusing amplified enforcement efforts – pulling all of the available levers – on the individuals most likely to commit violent crimes (in the neighborhoods in which they are most active), and thereby increasing the threatened likelihood of their apprehension and/or the severity of the sanctions applied, law enforcement and other community actors can expect to deter criminal acts. It might also be possible to disrupt or reverse patterns of peer influence that draw youth into violence. A number of communities have implemented focused deterrence initiatives, and some of these interventions have been demonstrably effective in reducing levels of youth violence. Drawing on studies of several programs, we first describe their principal components and then summarize the evidence on program effectiveness. The programs described include: Boston’s Operation Ceasefire; the Violence Reduction Partnership (IVRP) in Indianapolis; Chicago’s Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) initiative; the PSN program in Lowell, Massachusetts; East Los Angeles’ Hollenbeck Operation Ceasefire; High Point, North Carolina’s West End Initiative; Minneapolis’ Hope, Education, Law and Safety (HEALS) Initiative; Winston-Salem’s Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative (SACSI) program; the SACSI program in Rochester; and the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence.²

¹ For example, research prior to the implementation of the Winston-Salem SACSI program revealed that only 0.4 percent of the total juvenile population had been charged with violent offenses, and that only 0.05 percent of the juvenile population was regarded as “serious” violent offenders; Doug Easterling, Lynn Harvey, Donald Mac-Thompson, and Marcus Allen, *Evaluation of SACSI in Winston-Salem: Engaging the Community in a Strategic Analysis of Youth Violence* (Washington: NCJRS, 2002). Additionally, a homicide review in Cincinnati revealed that less than 1 percent of the city’s total population was responsible for 74 percent of the homicides; Robin S. Engel, S. Gregory Baker, Marie S. Tillyer, John Eck, and Jessica Dunham, *The Implementation of the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV): Year 1 Report* (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati Policing Institute, 2008).

² On Boston’s program, see Anthony A. Braga, David M. Kennedy, Elin J. Waring, and Anne M. Piehl, “Problem-Oriented Policing, Deterrence, and Youth Violence: An Evaluation of Boston’s Operation Ceasefire,” *Journal of Research on Crime and Delinquency*, 38 (2001), pp. 195-225; see also David M. Kennedy, Anthony A. Braga, and Anne M. Piehl, *Reducing Gun Violence: The Boston Gun Project’s Operation Ceasefire* (Washington: NIJ, 2001). On Indianapolis’ program, see Edmund F. McGarrell, Steven Chermak, Jeremy M. Wilson, and Nicholas Corsaro, “Reducing Homicide through a ‘Lever-Pulling’ Strategy,” *Justice Quarterly*, 23 (2006), pp. 214-231. On Chicago’s program, see Andrew Papachristos, Tracey Meares, and Jeffrey Fagan, *Attention Felons: Evaluating Project Safe Neighborhoods in Chicago* (New York: Columbia University, 2006). On Lowell’s program, see Anthony A. Braga, Glenn L. Pierce, Jack McDevitt, Brenda J. Bond, and Shea Cronin, “The Strategic Prevention of Gun Violence Among Gang-Involved Offenders,” *Justice Quarterly*, 25 (2008), pp. 132-162. On East Los Angeles’ program, see George Tita, K. Jack Riley, Greg Ridgeway, Clifford Grammich, Allan F. Abrahamse, and Peter W. Greenwood, *Reducing Gun Violence: Results from an Intervention in East Los Angeles* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2003). On High Point’s program, see High Point, North Carolina Police Department, *High Point West End Initiative: A Data-Driven, Police & Community Partnership Strategy to Reduce Drug-related Crime and Violence*. On Minneapolis’ program, see David M. Kennedy and Anthony A. Braga, “Homicide in Minneapolis: Research for Problem Solving,” *Homicide Studies*, 2 (1998), pp.262-290. On Winston-Salem’s program, see Easterling, et al., *op. cit.* On Rochester’s program, see John M. Klofas, Christopher

Program Components

Focused deterrence strategies share a number of common components and follow the same general framework (although the ways that they may differ are detailed below). They rest on the fundamental assumptions that offenders are rational,³ and that confronting offenders directly is the first step toward altering their perceptions of risk. They further assume that such direct communications may also reverberate through the informal communication network of offenders, especially if they are gang-involved.⁴ Such strategies are implemented by a multi-agency consortium to ensure that a variety of sanctions can be used against these chronic offenders, and also that a variety of services are available to them to facilitate the choice to desist from crime. Once a particular crime problem (such as youth homicide) is selected, an interagency working group conducts research to identify offenders, gangs, and behavior patterns, and then the group frames a response designed to offer a range of sanctions to deter offenders. The threats that these sanctions represent are communicated directly to identified offenders, through media described below. At the same time that this deterrence message is being delivered, community resources are also focused on targeted offenders and groups to further induce a cessation of violent behavior. Cincinnati's program summarizes the pulling levers message succinctly: "We will help you if you let us, but we will stop you if you make us."⁵ During the intervention, working group members continue to communicate to offenders the purpose of the ongoing attention.⁶ The success of a pulling levers strategy depends on two factors: how well the response is tailored to the selected crime problem, and whether or not the promises that are made (regarding subsequent law enforcement crackdowns and access to social services) are kept. Offenders are able to quickly ascertain hollow threats and empty promises.

Focused deterrence strategies differ along a number of dimensions including the targeted population, preliminary enforcement actions, the medium for delivering the pulling-levers message, and how well the message is followed by action (see Table 1). All of these components differ according to the type of crime problem the intervention is designed to address: firearm homicide, gun violence more generally or, in the case of High Point, NC, drug-related crime and violence.

Target population

Many programs, including Boston, Lowell, Minneapolis, and Cincinnati, target gang members. In Lowell, 71 percent of the homicides had gang-related motives and gang members were identified as offenders in 74 percent of the homicides. Additionally, not all gangs

Delaney, and Tisha Smith, *Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative (SACSI) in Rochester, NY* (Washington: NCJRS, 2007). On Cincinnati's program see Engel, et al., *op. cit.*

³ As Easterling et al. note, a "rational" offender will understand the negative consequences of offending, will appreciate the positive consequences of pro-social behavior, and will then be able to make a choice that maximizes his or her welfare ("expected utility"). However, offenders often act impulsively rather than logically and notification sessions do not address other factors that may influence negative behavior such as peer pressure, mental illness, boredom, and lack of opportunity. Easterling, et al., *op. cit.*

⁴ McGarrell, et al., *op. cit.*

⁵ Engel, et al., *op. cit.*, p. 6

⁶ Adapted from Braga, et al., *op. cit.*; based on David Kennedy, "Pulling Levers: Chronic Offenders, High-Crime Settings, and a Theory of Prevention," *Valparaiso University Law Review* 31 (1997), pp. 449-484; and "Old Wine in New Bottles: Policing and the Lessons of Pulling Levers," in David Weisburd and Anthony Braga (eds.), *Police Innovations: Contrasting Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

contributed to the violence equally – less than one half of the gangs in the city were responsible for the majority of the gang violence.⁷

Table 1. Programmatic Options

Target Population		Preliminary Enforcement Action	Medium for Delivering Message		
Offender type	Offender age range		Type of call-in	Type of attendance	Additional methods
All gang members	Open / no restriction	None	No call-in ^a	Compelled probationer/parolees	Individual police/probation contacts
Selected gang members	Youthful	Federal prosecution	Traditional call-in ^b	Voluntary ^c	Meetings with inmates
High-risk offenders	Juveniles only	Local crackdown	Enhanced call-in ^d		Gang outreach workers
Crime-specific offenders		Cases made against targeted offenders	Call-in combined with additional methods		Radio bulletins Home visits ^e Street outreach after violence Hospital-based intervention

^a. Only additional methods used.

^b. Law enforcement, social services, and community.

^c. In the case of juvenile offenders, parents may be invited.

^d. Law enforcement, social services, and other attendees such as local employers.

^e. By social service representatives.

Other programs, such as Indianapolis and Rochester, target high-risk probationers and parolees, while High Point’s program focuses on active street dealers. Most programs focus on

⁷ Interestingly, Lowell developed different strategies based on the type of gang. Task force members felt that a general lever-pulling strategy would work with Hispanic gangs, but not with Asian gangs who are more organized, more secretive, and less territorial and visible. Thus, when an Asian street gang was violent, LPD targeted the gambling businesses run by older gang members, relying on evidence that more social control is exerted by older Asian criminals over their younger counterparts.

youthful (but not juvenile) offenders, but Winston-Salem’s program formally focuses on four separate age cohorts – 11 and under, 12-15, 16-17, and 18 and older. It is important to note that none of these decisions about the target population(s) occurs in a vacuum. Each site that has implemented a lever-pulling strategy began with a problem solving framework that included a collaborative effort to determine the exact nature of the violence problem (and, therefore, the offenders to target) in their jurisdiction.

Preliminary Enforcement Action

For some programs, notification meetings are the first public step in the focused deterrence initiative. For others, the initial message delivery is preceded by a federal prosecution or some other law enforcement initiative. For example, at a press conference in Minneapolis, officials pointed to a recent federal prosecution as the kind of consequences that violent gangs would face if their violent activities continued.⁸ High Point, with a focus on drug dealers, makes cases against offenders prior to the call-in meetings; during the notification session, law enforcement officials inform offenders that undercover purchases have already been made and all that is needed is a signature on the arrest warrant if offenders step out of line.

Medium for Delivering the Message

Boston’s Operation Ceasefire, the first lever-pulling strategy, developed a concept for delivering a focused deterrence message dubbed “call-in” (or notification) meetings. Most of the lever-pulling programs that followed Boston use a similar method as their primary means of communicating a deterrence message to violent offenders. Groups of selected offenders are directed or invited to appear at a designated place – often a courtroom – at a designated time. Call-in meetings typically follow a specific format that begins with representatives of law enforcement detailing how violent behavior will evoke an immediate and intense response. The law enforcement segment is followed by social service speakers, who describe various program options for those who wish to change their behavior, as well as community members who speak about the impact that violence has on the community. In Chicago, local employers often attend call-in meetings and tell offenders the necessary steps to gain employment with their respective firms. A well-organized call-in meeting is theatrical, which may make the message more powerful and memorable, and the call-in meeting is generally considered to be a successful medium for delivering the focused deterrence message.

Offenders are typically compelled to attend meetings by virtue of their probation or parole status.⁹ However, some programs (such as Chicago’s) merely invite offenders to attend, on the premise that compulsion would tend to erode offenders’ sense of procedural fairness, and the corollary that their compliance with the law turns to a degree on their regard for the legal system.¹⁰ Programs that focus on juveniles will also invite parents to call-in meetings as well.

⁸ In Indianapolis, a long-term federal investigation (started during the initial formation of IVRP) resulted in the arrest of 16 violent gang members. Although this crackdown occurred after call-in meetings had begun, it helped working group members communicate a zero tolerance message towards violence in subsequent call-in meetings; it showed that the law enforcement threat made was credible.

⁹ Warrants may be ceremoniously issued for the arrest of no-shows, and made a part of the focused deterrence message during the call-in for those who do attend.

¹⁰ See Papachristos, et al., *op cit.*, pp. 5-6, and more generally Tom R. Tyler and Yuen J. Huo, *Trust in the Law: Encouraging Public Cooperation with the Police and Courts* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002). Papachristos, et al., report that while voluntary, attendance was 98 percent (p. 15).

In addition to (or instead of) call-in meetings, focused deterrence initiatives get the message out to targeted offenders via secondary methods such as individual police and probation contacts, meetings with inmates, contacts with gang outreach workers, or radio bulletins. In Winston-Salem, notification sessions are followed by individual home visits by “Operation Reach” representatives who provide information on the services available to the offender and his or her family. Other forms of communication may be used: Lowell, for example, floods the street after gang violence to communicate that offenders are under scrutiny for continued violence and to reiterate offers for social services. One program – Minneapolis – takes the unique step of delivering a deterrence message to gang-involved victims of violence in the hospital.

Follow-up/Consequences

Follow-up concerns two components: law enforcement and social services. We might suppose that it is important to pair sanctions (or the promise of sanctions) with help and services, both in order to most effectively shape offenders’ choices and to promote the legitimacy of the initiative in the eyes of the community, though neither supposition has been empirically tested.

Working group members utilize a number of law enforcement “levers” to deter violence. These include: parole and probation checks, warrant enforcement, saturation patrol, increased prosecutorial attention (including federal), intensified disorder enforcement, disruption of street-level drug markets, and housing and property code enforcement. Lowell took the step of reserving federal enforcement efforts for “impact players” (those deemed particularly dangerous and resistant to any social intervention) because removing them from the street was the only means to protect other youth from their violent behavior. A wide variety of social services were offered to offenders as well. These included: substance abuse treatment, tattoo removal, counseling, job training and development, housing assistance, parenting assistance, mentoring, and union and vocational training. Other programs, like Winston-Salem, High Point and Cincinnati, utilize resource coordinators and/or a case management system to ensure offenders can get the help they need.

Although many evaluations provide information on the *intended* consequences for recurring violence following notification, they do not routinely describe the *actual* consequences, but some evaluations detailed both the successful and unsuccessful efforts to deliver on promises made during call-in sessions. In High Point, notified drug offenders were flagged in the police record management system and any subsequent drug dealing resulted in an immediate arrest. Cincinnati law enforcement conducted targeted crackdowns following a homicide, but information from gang members on the street suggested members did not believe law enforcement knew who they were and, further, that they would not focus on groups. This perception was refuted at the next call-in session through a display of surveillance photos and a group network analysis, as well as with the presence of 30 individuals currently in police custody. In East Los Angeles, however, although the law enforcement component was fully implemented, efforts focused almost exclusively on the two groups involved in the triggering incident, and this singular focus meant that the intervention “never created a constant perception that violent behavior would provoke an immediate response.”¹¹ Winston-Salem had difficulties enforcing promised consequences for subsequent violence, especially in the case of juveniles. Judges were often reluctant to impose harsh penalties for anything but the most serious cases, which meant prosecution efforts were not as successful.

¹¹ Tita, et al., *op cit.*, p. 18.

Service delivery was also hit or miss. For example, in East Los Angeles, the law enforcement intervention began before services were in place, which meant they were never widely available. The Operation Reach program in Winston-Salem offered only one-time contact and is quite time-intensive so promises of support were not always substantiated. In Cincinnati, however, 176 individuals have been engaged in the services program, 81 percent of whom had not attended a call-in session, but rather heard about it through some other means.

Costs

Focused deterrence initiatives, done properly, demand commitments of resources from multiple agencies. As with many innovations in law enforcement, the development of the early focused deterrence initiatives benefited from external financial support. For example, Boston, Chicago and Indianapolis received a substantial infusion of federal funds to underwrite the costs associated with the interventions. But even without generous funding from external grants, it may be possible to implement focused deterrence initiatives through the strategic management of agencies' existing resources. Drawing on lessons learned from the Indianapolis experiment, Chermak observes that applying levers should be viewed as a more strategic means of allocating current resources rather than conceived of as add-on responsibilities.¹² For example, social service providers need not presume they must expand current capacity, but rather they might tailor eligibility criteria. Law enforcement need not rely only on overtime to fund enforcement actions; it might more strategically direct units. Probation and parole could reduce costs by restructuring caseloads. Chermak also suggests that limiting the number of groups and/or individuals targeted, in lieu of a more broad-based strategy, could be a sound means of maximizing cost-effectiveness.

Even with multi-agency collaboration at the local level and strategic allocation of resources, focused deterrence is a significant undertaking that carries with it costs that may not be feasibly absorbed in normal operating budgets. Successful programs have capitalized on blended funding streams and diverse sponsor agencies. Costs should be spread across agencies, and drawn from local, state and federal sources as well as from private foundations and corporate sponsors.

Outcomes

A number of evaluations of focused deterrence strategies have been conducted, most of them on the "flagship" program in Boston, implemented in 1996. Operation Ceasefire in Boston is generally credited with a 63 percent reduction in the number of monthly homicides and, when compared to 39 other major cities, Boston had the largest statistically significant decline in youth homicide between 1991 and 1997.¹³ Other programs experienced similarly substantial

¹² Steven Chermak, *Reducing Violent Crime and Firearms Violence: The Indianapolis Lever-Pulling Experiment* (Washington: NIJ, 2008).

¹³ Braga, et al., "Problem-Oriented Policing, Deterrence, and Youth Violence." Other evaluations find evidence of a large youth homicide drop in Boston following Ceasefire, but suggest caution in the interpretation of findings based on data-driven limitations with statistical models, the complexity of analyzing city-wide trends, and the limitations of a non-randomized, non-controlled experiment that cannot fully consider all of the complex factors that may affect youth homicide. See Richard Rosenfeld, Robert Fornango, and Eric Baumer, "Did Ceasefire, Compstat, and Exile Reduce Homicide?" *Criminology & Public Policy* 4 (2005), pp. 195-225; Jens Ludwig, "Better Gun Enforcement, Less Crime," *Criminology & Public Policy* 4 (2005), pp. 677-716; and National Research Council, *Firearms and Violence: A Critical Review*, Committee to Improve Research Information and Data on Firearms, Charles F. Wellford, John V. Pepper, and Carol V. Petrie, eds. (Washington: National Academies Press, 2005).

reductions: High Point noted a 38 percent decline in violent crime one year post-notification; in Cincinnati, overall homicides declined 43 percent compared to the same period in the preceding year and homicides involving a group member declined 61 percent; and in Lowell, mean monthly counts of firearms violence decreased by 28 percent. A number of more rigorous quasi-experimental evaluations also found significant reductions. The lever-pulling strategy in Indianapolis was associated with a 34 percent drop in homicide (a decrease that was not matched in other comparable cities), and focused enforcement in East Los Angeles resulted in significant reductions in violent and gang crime in the target areas relative to matched comparison areas. Chicago experienced a 37 percent drop in quarterly homicide rates in treatment areas, and the evaluation further found that decreases in gang-related homicide were directly related to the percentage of offenders who attended a call-in session.

In Winston-Salem, however, where efforts were focused on juveniles (who did not believe they would be subject to harsher penalties, especially as long as they were juveniles), rates of re-offending among notified youth were the same as offending rates in a comparison group. However, in targeted neighborhoods, violent crime (especially robbery) declined. This “apparent paradox” between re-offending rates among targeted youth and neighborhood crime reductions “suggests that SACS’s primary benefits occurred at the systems level – introducing new norms into the community and improving coordination among the various players who can influence violent behavior on the part of young persons.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Easterling et al., *op. cit.*, abstract.