

**F I N N**

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## **Utica Police Department's Strategies to Address Violent Crime**

**Report to Justice & Security Strategies for the BJA Small and  
Rural Violent Crime Reduction Grant**

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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.

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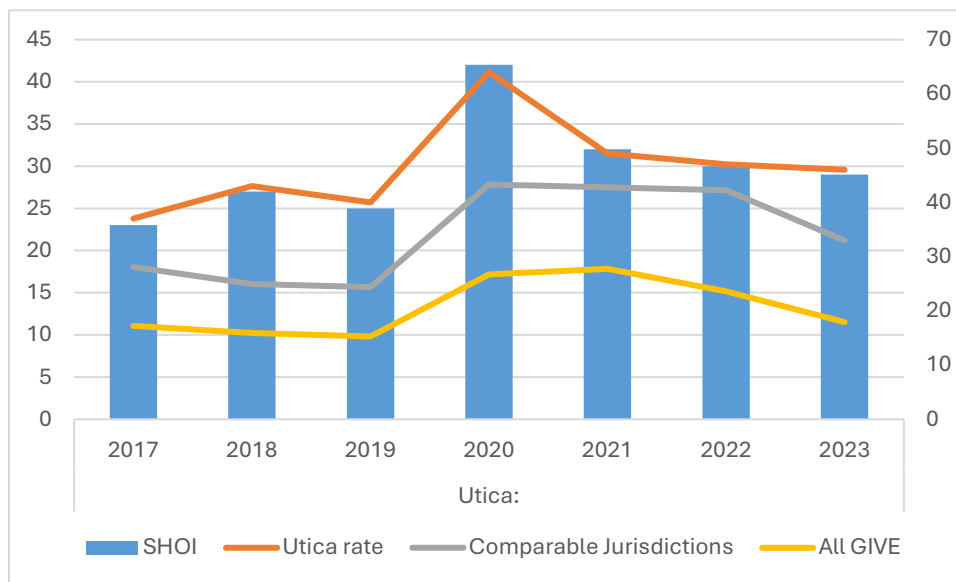
## Examining Utica Police Department’s Strategies to Address Violent Crime through the SARA Model Lens

### Scanning

*What is Utica doing to identify problems that contribute to local gun violence?*

UPD has long considered gun violence to be a priority. These offenses represent a meaningful share of the city’s violent crime and historically, rates of shootings with injuries in Utica have surpassed the combined average of jurisdictions of comparable population sizes<sup>1</sup>. In 2020, the number of shooting incidents that resulted in injury increased by 68%, rising from 25 in 2019 to 42 in 2020. Figure 1 depicts counts of shootings with injuries in Utica on the left axis, and rates of shootings with injury per 100,000 for Utica, comparable jurisdictions, and all GIVE jurisdictions on the right axis. As shown in this figure, in the year 2020 the rate of shooting incidents with injury per 100,000 in Utica was more than 20 points higher than that of comparable jurisdictions, and more than double that of the combined average of the other GIVE jurisdictions. Though the incidence of these events has waned over the past 3 years, this rate remains significantly higher in Utica.

Figure 1 Shooting with Injury Rates and Incidences



<sup>1</sup> Comparable jurisdiction sizes included in this graph are Binghamton, Troy, Hempstead, Niagara Falls, Mt. Vernon, and Schenectady, NY.

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Low clearances for violent crimes negatively impact police-community relations, threaten perceived police legitimacy, and embolden offenders to re-offend. Therefore, it is no surprise that UPD has prioritized formulating and executing evidence-based strategies to apprehend and prosecute the perpetrators of these crimes. Patterns and trends of gun violence in Utica are not unlike those in jurisdictions across the state. Firearms offenses that result in injury are constrained to a relatively small group of people, many of whom are considered chronic offenders. Most of these individuals are associated with gangs or groups, though the strength of this association varies. Shootings are often motivated by beefs or arguments, though most shootings cannot be firmly linked to any discernable motives. Shooting incidents are concentrated in specific areas designated as Hot Spots, on the West and East sides of the city, and gun violence has been consistently clustered in these geographic areas over a long period of time. Finally, and importantly, offenders of these crimes are recently skewing younger. In 2017, many NFS victims were in the age range of 30-35, while more recent victims are more often aged 18-21. Moreover, intelligence gleaned from Field Information Officers (FIOs), patrol officers, detectives, and crime analysts indicate that the offending population is now younger than previous years.

## **Analysis**

*What is Utica doing to analyze the potential solutions to those problems?*

Information about gun violence and its perpetrators must be gleaned from numerous sources given its volatility and transience. UPD has engaged in several efforts to analyze the problem of gun violence in Utica, and highlighted below are the Nonfatal shooting (NFS) initiative, the Trust Building Initiative, street outreach, and other strategies fueled by the work of UPD aided by the Mohawk Valley Crime Analysis Center (MVCAC) and Field Intelligence officers (FIOs).

### *The Nonfatal Shooting Initiative*

In 2017, Utica became one of two pilot sites for an initiative that aimed to raise clearances for nonfatal shooting investigations. The New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) provided funding for the department to form a specialized nonfatal shooting team, comprised of one investigator from the PD and one from the DA's office, to exclusively investigate nonfatal shootings. This model deviated from more conventional case assignment practices in which nonfatal shootings are investigated by detectives who carry heavy caseloads composed of a variety of offense types. The initiative supported the position of a specialized crime analyst who, in addition to assisting specialized investigators, coded meticulous information about nonfatal shooting investigations that occurred pre- (1/1/2014- 10/31/2016) and post-initiative

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(11/1/2016-12/31/2019). This data captured granular information about the incident, all persons involved in the incident, investigative activities performed and collected evidence. The Finn Institute conducted extensive analyses of these investigations, exploring questions of investigative output, caseload, victim and witness cooperation. Beginning in July of 2023, UPD reengaged in a NFS program using state funds to support additional staffing and equipment and has also re-committed to meticulous data collection for analyses of investigative activities and outcomes.

### *The Trust-Building Initiative*

From July 2022 to July 2023, UPD participated in a DCJS-led initiative to engage in conversations with community members to build trust among the community and police through open and honest dialogues about issues important to both groups. Over the course of 12 monthly meetings, each lasting 2 hours, a group of roughly 7 community members and 10 police members met to discuss a range of issues including criminal justice reform, juvenile delinquency, and gun violence. Participant perspectives, changing outlooks and reflections were captured in post-meeting surveys and a series of interviews conducted by research staff at the Finn Institute. Conversations between community members and police served as an analytical window through which the department ascertained important community outlooks and insights on local gun violence and offending, especially among the juvenile population. The department has extended this effort through the GIVE X and GIVE XI funding periods.

### *Hot Spots and Top Offenders*

Utica uses Hot Spots and Top Offender lists to guide many of their enforcement efforts. Hot spots are locations within the city that have a high concentration of gun violence. These locations are identified by information obtained through FIO intelligence (such as information about upcoming parties or gatherings for homicide anniversaries) and crime mapping developed by the Mohawk Valley Crime Analysis Center (MVCAC) that depicts the frequency of gun violence in specific areas. More recently, hot spot maps overlay both years-long and contemporaneous (within 3-month) shooting data to enhance the level of detail and specificity of predicted gun violence. Anecdotal information has shown that these maps are reliably predictive of the location and incidence of gun violence.

Top offender lists are established through FIO intelligence, case reports, and social networking, and its members are identified via a scoring system that uses the following criteria: violent histories, probation or parole, information that indicates the individual is in possession of a firearm, and number of contacts with police. Lists are generated once a month, and an informational bulletin is distributed by MVCAC. Individuals on these lists are further prioritized and ranked with information of total number of arrests, recent gun offenses, if they have been the victim of a shooting and if

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they have any active warrants. This top offender list has spurred multi-agency collaborative responses to dangerous people and groups, disrupting and dismantling firearm and drug trafficking operations and expanding agency knowledge of local criminal networks.

#### *Community Outreach Team*

Analysis and intel concerning local gun violence is further collected by the Community Outreach Team. This team, consisting of 3 full-time officers, attends Neighborhood Watch and Common Council meetings, establishing a police presence at community functions and fostering trust with communities plagued by gun violence.

### **Response**

#### *What is Utica doing to act on those solutions and strategies?*

Gun offenses are difficult to solve, characterized by uncooperative victims, absent or uncooperative witnesses, and scarce probative evidence. Lucky investigators may find surveillance footage or social media evidence, and very lucky investigators might unearth information from someone with knowledge. Equipped with information provided by Hot Spots and Top Offender lists, UPD engages in numerous efforts to deter would-be offenders and apprehend guilty parties.

#### *Save Our Streets*

Based on the Group Violence Intervention (GVI) model, the Save Our Streets (SOS) program establishes contact with FIO- identified at-risk individuals, or those whose criminal trajectories might be interrupted, to deliver an anti-violence message to curb violence or deter corrosive social engagement. The SOS program is crewed by community members, clergy, reformed ex-offenders, police officers and prosecutors, and recently has partnered with SNUG (New York State's version of the Cure Violence initiative). Crucially, the program director is considered a credible messenger among groups and communities exposed to gun violence, and under his leadership, SOS has stifled several potentially violent events.

#### *County Offices*

UPD's gun violence strategies work with and are supported by efforts of other agencies, such as the Oneida County Probation office, and the Onieda County District Attorney's (DA) office. The Probation office enhances the level of presence and engagement in hot spot areas by delivering home visits to probationers who reside in areas with recent shooting activity. The DA's office employs two prosecutors who work exclusively on cases that fall under a specific purview: those involving gun violence,

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firearms, top offenders, or hot spots. Through this specificity, these prosecutors develop expertise and in-depth knowledge of the offenders and these crimes, and are further supported by intelligence gathered by dedicated FIOs.

### *Teen Accountability Court*

Given the increased involvement of youth in gun violence, the County Probation Department and DA's office devised a Teen Accountability Court to reduce recidivism and stem youth participation in violent crime. This court was developed in 2024 to fill gaps in existing enforcement and judicial systems by directing focus towards high-risk youth (ages 14-17) who have been prosecuted for gun offenses. The program provides for field contacts, weekly judicial reviews, GPS monitoring, and therapies to address root causes for criminal behavior and socialization, and UPD serves as a partner in their efforts.

### *Cellebrite SAS*

In 2023, UPD purchased Cellebrite, a digital forensics tool that aids in the investigations of crimes where access to information in locked phones is required. In order to enhance its utility for homicide investigations and high-level felonies, the department upgraded their technology in 2024 to allow for a greater number of phone unlocks, from 35 to 140. This technology has been used in many cases that featured a top offender, expanding detective's knowledge of offender's activity and increasing the potential knowledge for evidence and criminal networks.

The use of Cellebrite to unlock phones is documented below, in Table 1.

*Table 1*

<b>Year</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>2021</b>	46
<b>2022</b>	50
<b>2023</b>	45
<b>2024</b>	23 <sup>1</sup>
	156

<sup>1</sup> Number of 2024 unlocks estimated as of 10/20/2024

### *Nonfatal shooting initiative*

UPD's engagement in the NFS initiative has shown early dividends in clearances: when we compare clearances of nonfatal shootings pre-GIVE X and during the initiative, clearances went up more than 10 percentage points (from 26.1% to 42.1%), See Table 2.

Table 2

	<b>Pre %</b>	<b>Post %</b>
<b>Open active</b>	4.6	31.6
<b>Open, not active</b>	10.8	10.5
<b>Arrest</b>	26.1	41.1
<b>Exceptional clearance</b>	1.5	5.3
<b>Closed- victim uncooperative</b>	13.8	5.3
<b>Closed no further leads</b>	43.1	5.3
<b>Total</b>	65	19

Five investigators assigned to the Major Crimes Unit now handle all nonfatal shootings, in addition to other qualifying major crimes. Detectives follow an investigative checklist and work alongside the specialized ADAs to produce strong cases for prosecution. The data show that NFS initiative amplifies other anti-violence initiatives at UPD. Among all nonfatal shootings that occurred in Utica since 1/1/2021, 40% featured someone who was featured at least once on a top offender list. Of these cases, arrest rates were 41%, compared to 22% among cases that did not feature a top offender. See Table 3.

Table 3

	<b>No top offender</b>	<b>Top offender case</b>
<b>Case open, still actively investigated</b>	8%	15%
<b>Case open, not actively investigated</b>	10%	12%
<b>Arrest (Adult)</b>	18%	35%
<b>Arrest (Juvenile)</b>	4%	6%
<b>Death of suspect(s)</b>	4%	0%
<b>Closed – victim uncooperative</b>	12%	12%
<b>Closed – no further evidence/leads</b>	44%	21%
<b>Total</b>	50	34

Cases with top offenders likewise received greater investigative effort (as recorded in coded data): investigative personnel performed over 50 activities on 62% of cases featuring a top offender, compared to 34% of cases without a top offender (See Table 4). We also see this reflected in the number of interviews performed: among cases featuring a top offender, 30% featured 11 or more interviews, compared to 16% of cases without a top offender. Cellebrite was used to unlock phones in association with 14 nonfatal shooting cases, 50% of which featured a top offender.



Table 4

<b>N activities</b>	<b>No top offender</b>	<b>Top offender case</b>
<b>&lt; 10</b>	0%	0%
<b>11-20</b>	4%	0%
<b>21-30</b>	2%	3%
<b>31-40</b>	20%	15%
<b>41-50</b>	40%	21%
<b>51-75</b>	34%	44%
<b>76-100</b>	0%	18%
	50	34

Finally, cases featuring a top offender that resulted in arrest were active for a longer period of time: 68% of cases featuring a top offender that culminated in arrest resulted from investigations longer than 6 days, compared to 40% of cases without a top offender. See Table 5.

Table 5

<b>Days to arrest</b>	<b>No top offender</b>	<b>Top offender case</b>
<b>0</b>	30%	0%
<b>1-5</b>	30%	33%
<b>6-10</b>	10%	27%
<b>11-20</b>	20%	7%
<b>21-50</b>	10%	0%
<b>51-100</b>	0%	7%
<b>101+</b>	0%	27%
	10	15

## **Assessment**

*What is Utica doing to assess the efficacy of their responses and the significance of its impact(s)?*

Assessments of anti-gun violence initiatives in Utica are continual and analytical, though given the intractable nature of the problem, they are limited in their empiricism. Monthly GIVE meetings support discussions and review of ongoing and potential initiatives, and reports and analyses provided by Crime Analysts provide evidence of outcomes. The department actively seeks out and invites feedback from officers and detectives on their outlooks on initiatives.

