



# Project Safe Neighborhoods: Strategic Interventions

## Crime Incident Reviews: Case Study 3

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**May 2006**



**U.S. Department of Justice**  
**Office of Justice Programs**  
810 Seventh Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20531

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This project was supported by Grant #2002-GP-CX-1003 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. The Project Safe Neighborhoods Case Study series has benefited from the support, assistance, and comments of John Irving, Lois Felson Mock, Robyn Thiemann, and members of the Firearms Enforcement Assistance Team (FEAT) of the U.S. Department of Justice.

## Overview

The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed significant declines in the rate of crime in the United States. This was true for most types of crime, including homicide and serious violent crime.<sup>1</sup> Despite these declines, the level of gun crime in the United States remains higher than that experienced in other western democracies and is a source of untold tragedy for families and communities.<sup>2</sup> Given this context, in 2001 the Bush Administration made the reduction of gun crime one of the top priorities of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), along with combating terrorism and enhancing homeland security.

The vehicle for translating this priority into action is Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN). PSN represents a commitment to gun crime reduction through a network of local partnerships coordinated through the nation's 94 U.S. Attorneys' Offices. These local partnerships are supported by a strategy to provide them with the resources that they need to be successful.

The PSN initiative integrates five essential elements from successful gun crime reduction programs, such as Richmond's Project Exile, the Boston Operation Ceasefire Program, and DOJ's Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative. Those elements are: partnerships, strategic planning, training, outreach, and accountability. The partnership element requires that the local U.S. Attorney create workable and sustainable partnerships with other federal, state, and local law enforcement; prosecutors; and the community. Strategic problem-solving involves the use of data and research to isolate the key factors driving gun crime at the local level, suggest intervention strategies, and provide feedback and evaluation to the task force. The outreach component incorporates communication strategies geared at both offenders ("focused deterrence") and the community ("general deterrence"). The training element underscores the importance of ensuring that each person involved in the gun crime reduction effort—from the line police officer to the prosecutor to the community outreach worker—has the skills necessary to be most effective. Finally, the accountability element ensures that the task force regularly receives feedback about the impact of its interventions so that adjustments can be made if necessary.

### Partnerships

The PSN program is intended to increase partnerships between federal, state, and local agencies through the formation of a local PSN task force. Coordinated by the U.S. Attorney's Office, the PSN task

force typically includes both federal and local prosecutors, federal law enforcement agencies, local and state law enforcement agencies, and probation and parole. Nearly all PSN task forces also include local government leaders, social service providers, neighborhood leaders, members of the faith community, business leaders, educators, and health care providers.

### **Strategic Planning**

Recognizing that crime problems, including gun crime, vary from community to community across the United States, that state laws addressing gun crime vary considerably, and that local and state resources vary across the federal judicial districts covered by U.S. Attorneys' Offices, PSN also includes a commitment to strategic planning whereby the PSN program is tailored to local context. Specifically, PSN provides resources for the inclusion of a local research partner who works with the PSN task force to analyze the local gun crime problem and to share the findings with the task force for the development of a proactive plan for gun crime reduction. The research partners assist the task force through analysis of gun crime patterns and trends that can help the task force focus resources on the most serious people, places, and contexts of gun violence. The research partners can also bring evidence-based practice to the task force discussions of gun crime reduction strategies.<sup>3</sup> The inclusion of the research partner was also intended to assist in ongoing assessment in order to provide feedback to the task force.

Although each district creates strategic interventions that make sense in their local context, one strategy shared by all PSN task forces is increased federal prosecution of gun crime. PSN is built on the belief that the increased federal prosecution of gun offenders will reduce gun crime through the incapacitation of gun criminals and the deterrence of potential offenders. This working hypothesis is based on the notion that federal sanctions for gun crime are often more severe than those either available at the state level or likely to be imposed at the state level. Further, federal prosecution may include sanctions unavailable at the local level. The focus on prohibited persons possessing or using a firearm is built on the finding that a significant portion of gun crime involves offenders and victims with significant criminal histories. Thus, by increasing the certainty that a prohibited person in possession will face strong federal sanctions, the goal is to persuade potential offenders not to illegally possess and carry a gun.

The commitment to increased federal prosecution appears to be borne out. Fiscal year 2005 witnessed over 13,000 individuals charged with federal gun crimes, the highest number ever recorded by DOJ. Since PSN's inception, the number of federal firearms prosecutions has increased 73 percent.<sup>4</sup>

## Training

PSN has involved a significant commitment of resources to support training. This program has included training provided to law enforcement agencies on topics including gun crime investigations, gun crime identification and tracing, and related issues. Training on effective prosecution of gun cases has been provided to state and local prosecutors. Additional training has focused on strategic problem-solving and community outreach and engagement. By the end of 2005, DOJ estimates that nearly 18,000 individuals had attended a PSN-related training program sponsored by one of the many national PSN training and technical assistance partners.<sup>5</sup>

## Outreach

The architects of PSN also recognized that increased sanctions would have the most impact if accompanied with a media campaign to communicate the message of the likelihood of federal prosecution for illegal possession and use of a gun. Consequently, resources were provided to all PSN task forces to work with a media partner to devise strategies for communicating this message to both potential offenders and to the community at large. This local outreach effort is also supported at the national level by the creation and distribution of Public Service Announcements and materials (ads, posters). These materials are direct mailed to media outlets and are also available to local PSN task forces.<sup>6</sup>

The outreach component is also intended to support the development of prevention and intervention components. PSN provided grant funding in fiscal years 2003 and 2004 to the local PSN partnerships that could be used to support a variety of initiatives including prevention and intervention. Many initiatives were built on existing programs such as school-based prevention, Weed and Seed, or juvenile court intervention programs.

## Accountability

The leadership of the PSN initiative at DOJ has emphasized that PSN would focus on outcomes—i.e., reduced gun crime—as opposed to a focus on outputs such as arrests and cases prosecuted. That is, PSN's success is measured by the reduction in gun crime. This accountability component was linked to strategic planning whereby PSN task forces, working with their local research partner, are asked to monitor levels of crime over time within targeted problems and/or targeted areas.

## Additional Information

For more information on Project Safe Neighborhoods, visit [www.psn.gov](http://www.psn.gov). If you are interested in supporting your local Project Safe Neighborhoods program, please contact your local U.S. Attorney's Office.



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# Crime Incident Reviews

**P**roject Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) was developed in 2001 as the U.S. Department of Justice’s (DOJ) initiative for responding to and significantly reducing gun crime in the United States.<sup>7</sup> PSN represents a commitment to gun crime reduction through a network of local partnerships coordinated through the nation’s 94 U.S. Attorneys Offices (USAOs). These local partnerships are supported by a strategy to provide them with the resources that they need to be successful.

A series of promising practices and interventions has emerged in PSN sites across the country. Not all are utilized in all PSN sites, and those that are implemented are adapted to fit local contexts. Yet, these strategic interventions and practices are being utilized by a number of PSN task forces with promising results. The initial set of PSN working papers focuses on four of these practices: incident reviews, gun prosecution case screening, chronic violent offender lists, and offender notification meetings. The current study focuses on crime incident reviews.

## What Are Crime Incident Reviews?

Crime incident reviews provide one way of sharing detailed information about specific types of crime, most often homicide, in the local criminal justice system and using that information to develop strategic approaches to reduce that crime. The process may also contribute to closing open cases in the participating jurisdiction. Incident review has been one of the most widely adopted tools among PSN programs. Districts that have used them include Nebraska, Connecticut, the Eastern and Western Districts of Wisconsin, New Mexico, the Western District of New York, the Northern and Southern Districts of Indiana, the Middle District of North Carolina, and the District of Arkansas. These PSN task forces have built upon the experience of cities involved in the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative (SACSI) including Indianapolis, Boston, and Rochester, New York.<sup>8</sup>

Locations that have adopted incident reviews have developed programs that meet their own particular goals and needs. The programs have also grown and changed over time. While there is no standard approach, common features can be seen. The programs rely on input from front-line staff with street-level knowledge of the crimes being discussed. Representatives from across the criminal justice system—including law enforcement, prosecutors, probation and parole officers, and often others—participate in the process. Finally, the process involves researchers whose task it is to analyze the information pre-

sented and to identify patterns or other issues that may be useful in responding strategically to the crime problem.

### **Where Did Crime Incident Reviews Come From?**

Crime incident reviews share a common background with incident reviews in other fields but they also have developed to serve a particular need in criminal justice. The idea of a team of experts reviewing critical incidents is not uncommon. Industries have adopted critical incident review procedures to understand accidents and other unusual events. Physicians use morbidity and mortality conferences and reviews to understand patient deaths in hospitals and to search for ways to avoid such results. In these reviews the concern is most often with what can be learned from the individual case or episode and how that knowledge might be applied to prevent similar problems in the future.

Incident reviews in criminal justice seek to engage experts in the review of cases to find ways to intervene to prevent poor outcomes in the future. Incident reviews in criminal justice have also evolved to add to the knowledge of patterns of crime in order to prevent those crimes. That is, they are used to understand patterns or common features across cases and not just the idiosyncrasies of individual cases.

The most common use of incident review in criminal justice has been in the examination of homicide in local jurisdictions. Here, incident review has added much-needed detail that is not generally available with other methods.

### **Problem Solving and Incident Reviews**

The starting point for examining local crime problems has most often been the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR).<sup>9</sup> These data offer counts and rates of individual offenses and are available from either state-wide reporting agencies or the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The UCR data allow a task force to compare its jurisdiction to other jurisdictions to provide a relative assessment of its level of homicide or violent crime. Because these are aggregate counts of crime, they do not allow detailed analyses of geographic patterns, relationships among victims and suspects, and other related factors that may be contributing to the gun crime problem.

Some jurisdictions have adopted the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) reporting format to go beyond counts and rates to consider additional information, such as victim and suspect information and choice of weapon. The FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) have also been used in some jurisdictions. While these data can add to the valuable foundation available through the UCR, they provide limited information about the circumstances of homicide or about the relationships between victims and offenders, and typically are not available until well after the homicide event.

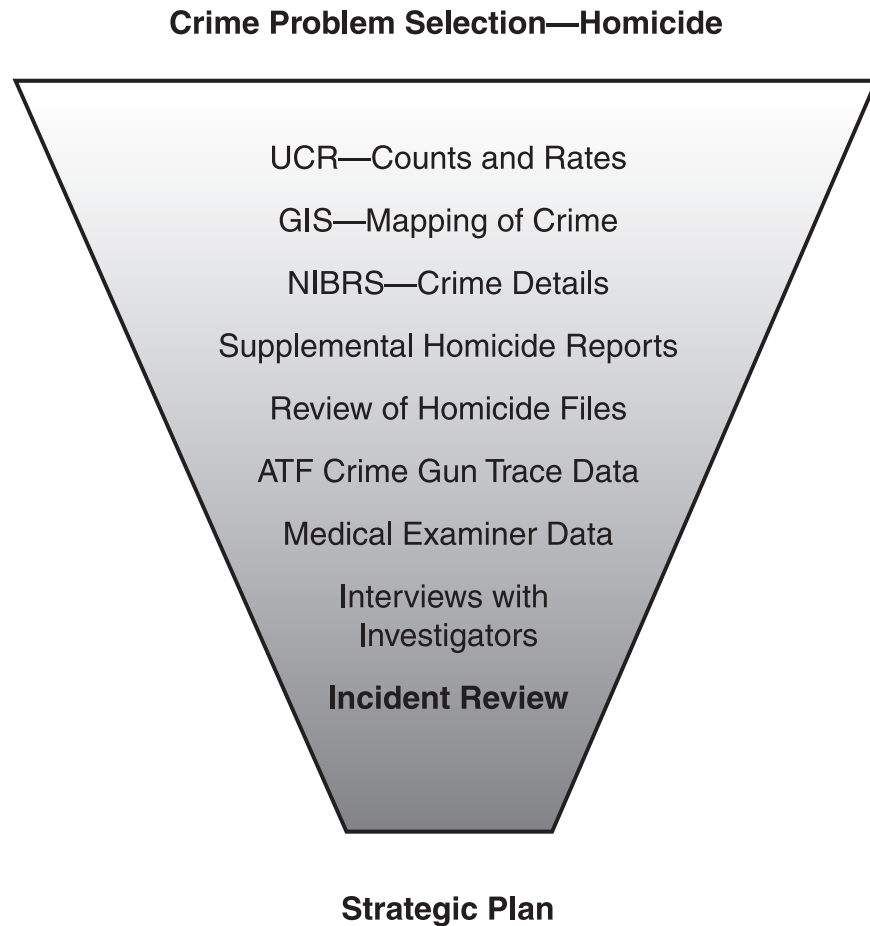
Local police department information systems can be excellent sources of information on incidents, calls for service, and arrests. Because they are incident based, they can be used for building crime maps and for linking incident data to other sources of information, such as gang and drug intelligence databases and criminal history records. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' (ATF) National Tracing Center provides data for information on guns involved in crime. Submitting the names of homicide victims, suspects, and their associates to the ATF PSN representative to search the ATF tracing database can provide rich information related to illegal gun markets, such as potentially corrupt gun dealers, straw purchasers, or associates.

There are other good sources of information on local homicides including medical examiners reports, trial or case processing data, and court and correctional data on the prior criminal histories of victims and suspects. These data can all contribute to the early stages of problem analysis. But even taken together the official data sources can provide only a limited picture; in many cases, they cannot provide details on the dynamics of homicide events or on their underlying causes. Incident reviews have been one method of identifying those needed details by providing a strategic planning process to reduce crime.

It is helpful to think of the problem-analysis phase of strategic planning as a "funnel" (see figure 1). A local strategic planning team starts at the funnel's mouth with the use of official crime data like UCR to identify the scope of the problem and its rate in the community. The team then moves down the funnel with an increasingly focused study based on what was learned above—for example, what is the age and gender of victims, what kinds of weapons are involved, and where are the incidents occurring? At the next stage, perhaps police files offer some evidence of motive. As the team's knowledge moves it toward greater and greater detail it also becomes clear that some new and different method will be needed to move beyond a certain point. That is, to reach a level of knowledge for use in strategic planning, some finer, more focused way of looking at the crime event is often needed. Some jurisdictions have done interviews with police or even with offenders; others have done detailed studies of case files to meet this need. And some have found incident review to be a useful tool for moving through the narrow end of the funnel toward developing interventions to reduce crime.

Because incident reviews may raise as many questions as they answer, they may not be the end of the analysis. A series of shootings following angry arguments may prompt the PSN task force to study local gun markets, or if incident reviews focus attention on a problem of gang violence, the task force may choose to interview teachers about gang recruitment in schools. In many cases, incident review will lead to questions that will themselves call for further examination.

**Figure 1: A Model for Studying Local Homicide and Developing Strategic Interventions**



## **Goals of Crime Incident Reviews**

A side benefit of the crime incident review process has been that it can help provide information that is useful in closing open cases. That benefit occurs because incident review is based on the premise that members of the local criminal justice system hold a vast pool of “street knowledge” about crime and criminals. Incident review taps into that pool. It draws on the street knowledge of law enforcement, federal law enforcement, prosecutors, probation officers, their parole counterparts, and many others from across the system.

Sharing that street knowledge is critical to the success of incident reviews and the key is in the details. Police officers, prosecutors, probation and parole officers, and others are used for those case details. They are trained to pay attention to the bits and pieces of evidence that make up a case. Their daily experience reinforces the importance

of those details. The street knowledge about the locations, the personalities, the nicknames, the associates, the cousins and the girlfriends, the beefs and the big scores, and all the other details that one comes by working on the street, make up the content of the review process. Incident review gives its participants an opportunity to share that information among themselves and then to use the information to design strategic interventions.

An important goal of incident reviews is to learn from looking across cases, to find the common threads and the shared ideas that help identify patterns that can be the basis for strategic planning. That is where researchers come in: their expertise is in finding the common themes, the shared bits, the patterns that are similar across cases.

It is in that combination of professionals with different training and experience that the potential of incident review is found. The researcher makes it more than a review of the latest case by practitioners, and practitioners make it more than researchers pouring over data in the file room. The goal of incident review is for a group of experts to combine two different sets of knowledge and skills—knowing and understanding the details of cases on one hand, and seeing their common threads on the other—so that the result is an understanding of the crime problem that supports the development of a strategic plan to help prevent those types of crimes.

## **Key Partners in Crime Incident Reviews**

The goal is sharing information, so it follows that the key is bringing together people with information to share. Different jurisdictions (and even the same jurisdiction at different times) have assembled teams of as many as 100 and as few as a handful, but all have brought together people with one critical element: street knowledge. That is, the participants must know the streets, the crimes that are being reviewed, their locations, the victims and suspects, their surroundings, their friends and enemies, their feuds and their loved ones. Together the participants should be able to put together a broad picture of the crime and its context.

No one person has all of this information at his or her fingertips. So the review involves a wide range of participants including: investigators of the crime, other officers familiar with the event and its location, gang and narcotic officers, probation and parole officers who may have cases in the area, federal law enforcement officials and prosecutors who may be involved in related or similar cases, and even youth gang workers who may know offenders and their peers. In some locations welfare investigators have brought their knowledge of individuals to the table. In others, ballistics experts have described a weapon's travel across crime scenes. Jail staff may bring unique knowledge of patterns of affiliation or antagonism among inmates and ex-

inmates. The important thing is to bring together the experts, the street experts in particular, who can help paint a picture of the crimes under review.

There are also many others with information to add. Supervisors and managers bring the institutional history to the table. They may know the incident that started the feud, or the case that led to prison that led to release and ultimately to revenge. And they may encourage their staff to connect details that may not have been apparent. Ultimately, they will support the growing awareness and intelligence gathering that feeds the incident review process.

The officer investigating the crime under review also plays a key role. He or she can lead the conversation, presenting the case and prompting others to add details. It is the investigator who most often understands the details of the cases as well as the gaps to be filled. And when that investigator realizes that the goal of the process is to bring forward new information, and not to second-guess an investigation, he or she can play a powerful role in painting the broad picture of the crime.

The researcher also has an important role. It is both an insider and outsider role. Researchers must be insiders in the sense that the other participants must be confident that they can maintain confidentiality, and they must know that the researcher shares the same goals as the rest of the group. They are outsiders, though, in the sense that they do not add to the details of the discussion. Instead, they must help structure the conversation to capture the details held by others. Researchers may ask key questions, seek clarification of details across observers, or prompt additional consideration as they seek to weave the common thread across a variety of cases.

Much of the researcher's role also takes place away from the incident review itself. Oftentimes the researcher plays a key role in preparing the presentation of cases for incident review meetings, working with investigators in reviewing files or in gathering information for presentation so that it prompts additional information from the participants. After the incident review meeting itself, the researcher's role is to examine the information that has been brought out by the participants and to identify those characteristics across cases that may help in developing intervention strategies.

One question in some jurisdictions doing incident reviews involves the possible role of community members. In most jurisdictions the incident review process involves discussion of information that is highly confidential. In those locations incident review is seen as an extension of the kinds of conversations that often occur among law enforcement and criminal justice officials. Besides the researcher, whose function in incident review is to serve the interests of law enforcement and the PSN team, others are generally excluded. There



have, however, been exceptions to that principle. In Milwaukee, officials are experimenting with a multi-stage process in which law enforcement-only reviews are followed by reviews involving social service agencies and community members where confidential information is not discussed. The goal of those meetings is to bring an additional element to the local violence prevention process.

## **Crime Incident Review: The Process**

While it is tempting to see crime incident review as a meeting in which cases are discussed in detail, incident review is probably better thought of as a process rather than as a meeting because there is much that precedes the meeting and much that follows. The key components are described below and include the following: planning and preparation, the crime incident review meeting, analysis, dissemination, strategic planning and problem solving, and evolution.

### **Planning and Preparation**

Organization is important and preparation begins long before the actual incident review meeting. It is useful to have a group in place that is charged with the responsibility for managing the process. That group should include at minimum representatives from the major participating organizations, police, prosecution, and probation and the research partner. The law enforcement representative should probably come from the investigations unit where much of the work will be done. The purpose of this group is to plan the incident reviews, supervise preparation, and critique, evaluate, and suggest needed changes in the process.

Perhaps the first critical questions for the group include what cases should be reviewed and how often? It is, of course, possible to immediately begin reviewing recent homicide cases on a monthly basis. Some jurisdictions, however, have found it useful to begin the process with a “grand review” of all murder cases from the past year. This may require one day or more for the incident review meeting itself but it can lay a useful foundation for regular monthly reviews.

When attention turns to regular reviews another question about which cases to review is likely to arise. Should the review be limited to homicides or include gun assaults or other gun crimes? Particularly in smaller jurisdictions there may be insufficient numbers of homicides to review and thus the choice may be to review gun assaults or all incidents involving a firearm. Should incident review be limited to open cases? The justification for opting for open cases only seems to come from the belief that there is little to be learned from closed cases. But the opposite is often true. The increased information available from closed cases makes them valuable to the strategic planning process.

The goal of getting the fullest picture possible of a crime problem supports review of both open and closed cases.

Regardless of the time frame chosen or the exact type of cases, a key to quality incident reviews is in the preparation (see figure 2 for examples of information to include). The cases must be prepared for presentation and the attendees must be prepared to contribute. The extent and nature of case preparation varies across locations doing incident reviews. For some it involves only investigators refreshing themselves about the facts of a case. In other jurisdictions more complex PowerPoint presentations are used to describe the case and report on the characteristics of victims, suspects, and other relevant persons.

**Figure 2: Presenting the Case: Examples of Information To Include in Crime Incident Review Presentations**

- Date, time, and street address where the crime occurred.
- The name and contact information for the main investigator.
- A map of the city showing the location of the crime.
- A map showing where victim and suspects live along with the location of the crime scene.
- A close-up map of the street or neighborhood where the crime occurred.
- Crime scene photographs.
- Photographs of key nearby points of interest such as abandoned buildings, parks, or social clubs.
- Victim photos or mug shots if available.
- Other victim information such as criminal record, work, or school history.
- Suspect photos or mug shots if available.
- Other suspect information such as criminal record, work, or school history.
- Photos and information on any other “person of interest.”
- Photos and information on known acquaintances.
- Maps of relevant group or gang territories.
- A list of key questions to consider.



The other participants in the review process have their own preparation efforts. Well before the review meeting, the participants should all receive a list of the cases to be reviewed and with it a list of the victims, suspects, and other persons of interest. That way, the participants can prepare by reviewing their own notes or databases to determine what they may know about the cases, locations, or participants.

### **The Crime Incident Review Meeting**

This meeting is the most prominent part of the process and to organize it requires asking many important questions, such as: Who should come? Where should the meetings be held? How should they be organized? While the answers to these questions will depend on the needs of a particular location, some choices, in general, appear more effective than others.

There is a benefit to wider attendance both across relevant organizations and across the layers of those organizations. As noted above, police agencies, prosecutors, probation, and parole representatives all have information to give and also to gain from other participants. Meeting away from the usual criminal justice venues may have some advantages. A large corporate conference room or training center can help set the right tone. And setting up the room appropriately, as a single large square or U-shaped conference table, can reinforce the idea that everyone has something to contribute.

The point of the meeting itself is to spark discussion. The investigator of a particular case may present the details as he or she knows them but it is for others to add to those details. For example, the location of the crime under discussion may be highlighted on a map of the city. With that, others may jump in by identifying nearby areas as known drug markets or by noting the groups that claim the territory or the probationers or parolees that reside or hang out nearby. Past patterns of offenses in the area may be described, nicknames of key players identified, or complaints of neighbors may be recounted. The point is to draw out as much detailed information that may be relevant to the crime as possible. Figure 3 shows a few of the questions that are asked of participants and used to prompt additional information.

There seems to be no end to the types of information that may be forthcoming in incident reviews. Ballistic evidence may link the case under review to others. Gang intelligence may shed light on motive. Probation officers may have evidence of prior assaults on friends of victims or suspects. Someone may see signs of drug deals gone bad. The process should bring all of this information to the forefront.

From the presentation of the investigator to the discussion by other participants, no stone should be left unturned. At their most successful, incident review meetings are lively, involve lots of participation, and inevitably elicit information that was not widely known. Getting it right

**Figure 3: Questions To Ask Participants**

- Do you know what happened in the case? (opening summary)

**Victim:**

- What do you know about the victim?
- What do you know about any associates of the victim?
- Was the victim part of a group of active offenders?

**Suspect/offender:**

- What do you know about the suspect/offender?
- What do you know about associates of the suspect/offender?
- Was the suspect part of a group of active offenders?

**Relationship:**

- What do you know about the relationship between victim and suspect/offender?

**Location:**

- What do you know about the location of the event?

**Motive:**

- What do you know about the reasons behind the incident?
- Was the incident drug related? How?

**Summary:**

- What do you think was behind the event? (final summary)

can also be time consuming and tiring. In a number of jurisdictions, the grand review of cases has been an all-day affair covering 40-60 cases over a six-month or annual period. In regular monthly meetings that last two to three hours, comprehensive incident reviews may typically involve anywhere between six and twelve cases.

### **Analysis**

Sharing information among members of the criminal justice system makes sense for its own sake. By itself, it is good practice. But it is what happens to that information that converts information sharing to strategic problem solving in the incident review process. Critical to that process is the role of the researcher.

In the incident review meeting the researcher shares the burden of assuring quality in the information exchange. Seeking additional detail, clarification, or elaboration are among the tasks in which he or she joins the other participants. The researcher's larger duty is assembling

the information produced in the review process in such a way that it can feed a strategic planning process. That means the researcher must look across the cases reviewed to find the common threads. The researcher must ask: What are the common features across cases? Are there common motives or circumstances? Are patterns present in the data? More specifically, how many and what kinds of homicides involve multiple assailants? What is the pattern of prior records of assailants in domestic violence homicides? What gangs or groups are involved in the crimes reviewed? What geography do they claim? How do they recruit new members? Are there key places to be concerned with: parks, corner stores, apartment buildings, bars, or recreation centers?

In the analysis of homicide some factors are widely shared across many jurisdictions. There may seem to be little variation in the characteristics of offenders and victims or in the weapon of choice. But drill below that common information and important local differences will emerge. The extent of geographic concentration; the role of drugs and the kinds of drugs involved; the network links among suspects, victims, witnesses, and associates; the role of transients; and the travel by offenders to the scene of their crime have all varied across settings and been highlighted in incident reviews. The researcher's role is to use the information shared in the review process to paint a picture of the local homicide problem (or other crime problem) in a way that supports the development of interventions to prevent, through focused deterrence and other means, the types of offenses described in incident review.

## **Dissemination**

Just as important as the analysis of the information brought forth by the incident review process and other sources is the dissemination of the analysis to those involved in strategic planning, as well as back to the participants in the incident review (see figure 4). This feedback loop is important for several reasons. First, it keeps the researcher accountable. If the front-line experts cannot see the fruits of their labor and the benefits of working with a researcher, the first criminal incident review may become the last criminal incident review. Additionally, the analysis may trigger participants to come forth with information they either forgot they knew or did not see as relevant at the time of the review. This can sharpen participants' focus for the next review, as well as indicate that some changes may be needed in developing the strategic plan.

In today's highly computerized age, information can be disseminated in many different ways. For example, in both the Southern District of Indiana and the Middle District of North Carolina, case information is available on a secure web site. In these and other districts such as the Eastern District of Missouri, e-mails are also sent to advise participants of new criminal events or meetings. Working

**Figure 4: After the Crime Incident Review:  
Other Sources To Consider**

- Criminal histories of both suspects and victims.
- Probation/parole status.
- Prohibited person status.
- Associate patterns.
- Geographic patterns.
- Motive patterns.
- Calls for service to key addresses.
- ATF gun tracing data.

papers that summarize the results of the review process can form the basis for discussion at strategic planning sessions. Complicated statistical models are not needed. Simple graphs and bar charts provide some of the most effective ways to communicate the information derived from the incident review.

### **Strategic Planning and Problem Solving**

From some perspectives, incident review may be thought of as an intervention in and of itself; that is, incident reviews are a program for system improvement. Incident review can strengthen communications across the criminal justice system by providing a venue that was not previously available. Likewise, incident review can lead directly to some system improvements that might otherwise go unaddressed. For example, in one location it was discovered in incident review that probation curfew violations were making it to police patrol officers only after several days and a circuitous route. Once uncovered the problem was easily fixed.

From a broader perspective, incident review should be thought of as part of the larger process of strategic planning and problem solving. As noted above, the ultimate goal of incident review should be to aid in the development of interventions to reduce and prevent crime. Toward that end, some strategies almost seem to flow naturally from incident reviews. In incident reviews it is common to identify a group of people who seem to be in or around major crimes with an unexpected frequency. In one monthly review, this group may be standing near a victim or suspect, in another, their car has been used in a drive-by shooting, and so on. These individuals, who might seem to be likely victims or suspects in the future, are probably good candidates for offender notification meetings, or they

may be prospects for making a list of chronic offenders or be candidates for screening for federal prosecution.<sup>10</sup>

The results of incident review should also feed more customized strategic interventions. Incident review findings identifying a violence-prone drug-selling group may lead to the drug unit prioritizing this group for a variety of investigation strategies. Similarly, finding that an incident involves individuals or associates who have previously been involved in offender notification meetings may result in home visits by probation and parole officers as well as drug tests and warrant service to deliver a focused deterrence message. Violence associated with hot spot locations such as an open drug market, commercial establishment, or drug house can result in a variety of hot spot interventions such as “buy-and-bust” operations, directed police patrol, “knock and talks,” parking of a police vehicle in front of the drug house, and interventions with parolees; a wide range of strategies may flow from the local analysis of crime incidents.

## **Evolution**

One final part of the process deserves attention. Neither the strategic planning process nor the incident review process that feeds it should be thought of as static or unchanging. Just the opposite should be the case. These processes should grow and change over time. Supporting that evolution is a key role for the management of the process.

The first change in the incident review process to be considered often involves the choice of cases for review. After sufficient time has been devoted to studying homicide, for example, the new knowledge produced by continued review of those incidents is likely to diminish. Expansion to consider other offenses may be desirable. In some jurisdictions the incident review process expanded to review serious aggravated assaults. In others, sex offenses have been considered during the incident review process.

Over time the shape of the review process as well as the target cases may change. In Rochester, New York, homicide incident reviews pointed increasingly to multiple assailants and important group processes. Over time the incident review process evolved to a process of identifying groups involved in crime and improving intelligence on gang related behavior. Even with these changes, the roles of information exchange by those with street level knowledge, and synthesis by a research partner, continue to be important. It seems likely that further changes will emerge as the process continues to evolve.

## Keys to Successful Implementation of Crime Incident Reviews

Crime incident review is one method of developing information needed in a strategic planning process, and has some valuable advantages. The information is local and current and can easily be integrated into a planning and problem solving process. However, incident review may not be well suited for all jurisdictions; like most processes, the degree of success in implementing incident review may depend on issues exclusive to the organizations involved. Figure 5 suggests some key factors that appear to increase the likelihood of success with incident reviews.

**Figure 5: Key Factors To Increase Success of Incident Reviews**

- Good cooperation and collaboration among key agencies in the local criminal justice system including the police, prosecutors, probation, and parole officers.
- Strong commitment from the leadership of those key organizations.
- Delegation of operational responsibilities to a committee representing the key organizations.
- Confidence among participants that incident review is not a forum for criticizing investigations and that information will be kept confidential.
- Sound analysis and quality research for input into the intervention planning process.
- Commitment among agency leaders to data-based strategic planning.
- Clear process for continuous assessment and revision to meet changing needs.
- Demonstrated linkage between the incident review meetings and strategic interventions on the streets to reduce gun crime and solve crimes.

## Conclusion

Criminal justice is in the midst of an information revolution. Where three-ring binders once sat piled on shelves, sleek new computerized databases now allow for sophisticated analyses of crime trends and patterns. New methods of accountability are found in innovative programs like New York City's COMPSTAT and other similar efforts. Those approaches can help law enforcement deploy resources quickly and respond to rapidly changing circumstances. They are sophisticated aids to tactical decision-making.

Crime incident reviews represent a different approach to getting and using information. They combine the strengths of data analysis with the expertise of street-seasoned observers. They inform strategic planning by identifying common characteristics of local crime problems, trust the skill and insight found in the rich experiences of front-line practitioners, and provide the power of multiple observations. Some jurisdictions have found them useful for getting a grasp on a problem during times of crime increases or in the wake of extraordinary cases. Other jurisdictions have added them to the repertoire of tools for ordinary times. In either case, the incident review process has potential to add to the knowledge needed to guide strategic efforts to reduce and prevent crime.



### **Connecting Crime Incident Reviews to Action on the Streets**

The real payoff of crime incident reviews comes not only from the sharing of information among criminal justice partners, but also from the strategic action that is based on the increased understanding of the people, places, and contexts that are driving gun crime in the particular jurisdiction. Indeed, the information from the reviews is crucial for implementing focused deterrence strategies that can reduce levels of gun violence.

When Indianapolis was experiencing record levels of homicides, officials within and outside the police department debated the extent to which gangs were involved in this increase. Although many believed that loosely organized gangs and neighborhood groups of offenders were driving gun violence, official records of homicides indicated that few homicides were gang motivated. Following the initial grand review of homicides, the Chief of Police stood up and stated that after participating in the incident review, there should no longer be any debate about whether the city's homicide problem was tied to gangs and drugs. Indeed, the incident review produced consensus about this issue and the task force devised a whole series of focused deterrence strategies aimed at groups of known, chronic offenders. The result was a 40 percent reduction in homicides.<sup>11</sup> Today, Indianapolis has accelerated these efforts by creating an "Achilles Unit" comprised of police and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) agents who take the information from the regular incident reviews and implement enforcement strategies aimed at those people and places currently driving gun violence. The PSN task force concurrently utilizes the incident review findings to develop longer-term prevention strategies.

The Middle District of North Carolina has been a leader in using crime incident reviews to drive strategy. This approach began during the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative program when incident reviews revealed patterns of adult offenders involving juveniles in gun crime. This revelation led to strategies focused on the adult offenders. More recently, the High Point Police Department's review process identified a drug market that was generating the city's most serious gun crime problems. Consequently, the PSN task force implemented a highly innovative strategy designed to shut down the drug market and significantly reduce gun crime. Specifically, undercover drug operations resulted in cases being developed on the key players involved in drug sales. Several of the major drug dealers believed to be involved in violence were arrested and prosecuted. The other offenders, rather than being arrested, were brought into an offender notification meeting along with family members. The individuals were informed of the cases that had been developed but told that if the drug market remained closed and violence stopped, the cases would be held in abeyance. On the other hand, if the market became active again or if violence continued, then the individuals faced federal prosecution for the drug offenses. The meeting also included linkage to service providers including mentors, employment and educational opportunities, and substance abuse coun-



seling. Although preliminary, the early findings from this intervention are very promising.<sup>12</sup>

The incident review conducted by the PSN task force operating in Lowell, Massachusetts found a pattern of youth gun crime involving Asian youth gangs. The incident review also uncovered street-level knowledge of a structured relationship between adults involved in illegal gambling operations and the Asian youth gangs. One key component of the strategic intervention involved the police informing the adults believed to be involved in gambling that if the youth gangs did not end their gun crime activity, the police would put even more attention on shutting down the gambling operations; in fact, evidence suggested that the adults did exert forms of social control as the rates of youth gun crime declined.<sup>13</sup>

The Rochester, New York, Police Department has been a leader in developing and refining the incident review process. When incident reviews indicated that drug houses were fueling much of the city's gun crime, the PSN research partner conducted focus groups in the local jail that indicated that drug houses likely to generate gun crime could be identified. This led to a series of strategies including "knock and talks" and undercover operations to shut down the high-risk drug houses. Similarly, the incident reviews indicated that many of the disputes that resulted in gun violence involved long-standing disputes that were known to many people in the neighborhood. Consequently, the city's street gang workers began to concentrate efforts on learning about such disputes and finding ways to intervene to prevent lethal outcomes.

The Rochester Police Department has developed a CD-based information tool on crime incident reviews, which is available online at [www.cj.msu.edu/~outreach/psn/resource\\_cd/index.htm](http://www.cj.msu.edu/~outreach/psn/resource_cd/index.htm).



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## Endnotes

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2. Levels of property crime and violent crime not involving a gun are lower in the United States. than many other western democracies, but gun crime remains exceptionally high in the U.S. See Zimring and Hawkins, 1999; Bureau of Justice Statistics: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/ijis.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/ijis.htm) (as of 12/28/04).
3. Reviews of promising gun crime reduction strategies that can assist research partners and task forces include Braga, 2004; National Research Council, 2005; Ludwig and Cook, 2003; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999. See also Dalton, 2003; Decker, 2003.
4. These data were reported by the U.S. Department of Justice, Executive Office for United States Attorneys (10/05).
5. Data compiled by Professor Joe Trotter and colleagues as part of American University's PSN Technical Assistance Program.
6. Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2004. See also [www.psn.gov](http://www.psn.gov).
7. Readers interested in a more detail about the background and strategic problem-solving model of PSN are referred to Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2004; [www.psn.gov](http://www.psn.gov); and McGarrell, 2005.
8. Dalton, 2004; Kennedy, Braga, and Piehl, 2001; Chermak and McGarrell, 2004.
9. Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2003.
10. See McDevitt et al., 2005; Bynum et al., 2005; Decker et al., 2005.
11. McGarrell and Chermak, 2003; Chermak and McGarrell, 2004.
12. See Frabutt et al., 2004; McDevitt et al., 2005.
13. Braga, McDevitt, and Pierce, 2006.