



# Project Safe Neighborhoods: Strategic Interventions

## Chronic Violent Offenders Lists: Case Study 4

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## 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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# Chronic Violent Gun Offender Strategies

Project 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 case studies focuses on four of these practices: crime incident reviews, gun prosecution case screening, chronic violent offender lists, and offender notification meetings. The current study focuses on chronic violent offender lists.

A principal aspect of Project Safe Neighborhoods is the focusing of efforts and resources on the most critical aspects of the gun violence problem. One approach to focusing efforts is through the identification of individuals who are the most violent gun offenders and developing strategies in response to these individuals.

Certainly the identification of those individuals who are the "most wanted" offenders in a jurisdiction is not a new concept. During the mid 1800s, posters of the "most wanted" individuals began to be posted in public places. For many years the pictures of the ten most wanted offenders have adorned post office walls throughout the country. Recently, the popular television program, *America's Most Wanted*, has presented the stories of individuals who are being sought for particularly notable offenses. In addition, law enforcement agencies around the nation typically have hot sheets or other mechanisms of communicating to officers to be "on the lookout" for particular individuals who are wanted in conjunction with an offense or investigation. Thus, the communication of identities of wanted suspects to the general public and throughout the law enforcement community is a widespread technique of considerable assistance in the apprehension of suspects.

Although the use of most violent gun offender strategies within the PSN approach shares certain characteristics with these traditional techniques, it differs from them in several important ways. First, most violent

gun offender initiatives are a component of a broader strategy to address gun violence in a jurisdiction. As such, this intervention is integrated with other components to form a comprehensive approach to reducing gun crime across a variety of agencies and roles. Second, this strategy involves the use of specific criteria (e.g., committing multiple gun offenses over a two year period) to identify the most violent individuals in a jurisdiction. While these criteria will vary across jurisdictions it is important that consistent criteria be developed and used within each jurisdiction to identify individuals having these characteristics.

A third manner in which this approach differs from more traditional methods is the use of data analysis in the identification of offenders to be included on these lists. The development of traditional most wanted lists is most often based upon current investigations of specific offenses and thus relies most heavily on information from active investigations. While intelligence is important in addressing violent crime, this chronic violent offender strategy emphasizes the identification of individuals who are engaged in gun violence without specific reference to an individual case. The objective is more focused on identifying those individuals who have demonstrated continued involvement in gun crimes and thus represent a considerable danger to the community and less upon solving specific crimes. Thus, data analysis can be used to apply the selected criteria to criminal history data to identify individuals who share these characteristics. Law enforcement intelligence concerning these individuals can then be used to refine the list and determine enforcement strategies and priorities.

## **Logical Basis of Chronic Violent Gun Offender Strategies**

It is well acknowledged through both research and experience that a small number of individuals account for a disproportionate number of offenses.<sup>8</sup> In some districts these individuals are known as “impact players,” acknowledging that these few individuals have a considerable impact upon violent crime in the local community as well as the fact that a large impact can be made in the level of community safety if these individuals desist from engaging in the crimes.

For the most part, the criminal justice system is not structured or organized to respond to this situation. Typically, the majority of our efforts are devoted to responding to cases and situations as they occur. The pressure to respond to calls for service, citizen complaints, and known offenses can often be overwhelming for many agencies. However, through PSN, many districts have found that devoting time to analysis and intelligence in the identification of a set of “impact players” and the integration of this information into enforcement and prosecution activities can produce considerable results in addressing gun violence.

## Goals of Chronic Violent Gun Offender Strategies

Certainly, the ultimate goal of chronic violent gun offender strategies is to reduce gun crime in the jurisdiction. There are a range of other goals or objectives that are also integral to this approach. These include:

- Increasing awareness of the identities of high rate gun offenders throughout the criminal justice system.
- Coordinating information sharing and enforcement activities concerning the most violent offenders within and across agencies.
- Enhancing officer safety through creating notification systems enacted as these individuals are encountered on the street.
- Creating a more efficient system through better focusing of resources upon a smaller number of offenders.
- Enhancing deterrence through enforcement and prosecution of chronic offenders involved in gun crime.

Creating a chronic violent gun offender strategy is by no means certain to be effective in achieving these goals. While this strategy appears to be straightforward, there are many important decisions that must be made regarding the design and implementation of the components of this approach that are critical to its success. The following sections will discuss these critical components in the creation and operation of these strategies.

### Who Is Involved

As with other PSN interventions, it is important that a coordinated approach across PSN partners be utilized with chronic violent gun offender strategies. The sharing of information across agencies should produce a greater level of awareness of the identities of these individuals and generate a more efficient response to situations involving these persons. In most circumstances, local law enforcement agencies may take the lead in the creation and dissemination of this list. Correctional agencies will also need to be included, as it is highly likely that many of these individuals may be currently or previously under correctional supervision. Prosecutors' offices also need to be involved to be aware of cases involving these individuals as they are received and take appropriate actions. In addition, PSN research partners can provide technical assistance in data analysis techniques that may be used in this process. Further, the broader task force may be involved in the determination of criteria for identifying offenders and crafting interventions based upon this information.

## Identifying Chronic Violent Gun Offenders

In the formulation of a chronic violent gun offender strategy a series of decisions must be made regarding the methods that will be used to identify offenders and how this information will be integrated into local criminal justice operations. These decisions often have no direct answer and each jurisdiction will need to resolve these issues through their own deliberations. What is appropriate for one jurisdiction may not be suitable in others.

As noted previously, the identification of chronic violent gun offenders is best approached through the integration of the analysis of multiple data sources with law enforcement intelligence. However, there are many ways in which this can be done. The following discussion will outline some of the principal decisions to be made in this process and how some jurisdictions have addressed these issues.

**Setting criteria.** One of the initial decisions that needs to be made is selection of the criteria that will be used to determine who is a chronic violent gun offender. What does it take to be included in the group of individuals who are determined to be “impact players?” Whatever criteria are selected should be applied in a standard and consistent fashion. In addition, a broad spectrum of data sources on offenders should be examined. The exclusive use of intelligence sources may omit some individuals who are deserving of being included with this group of offenders.

In some districts concerns have been expressed regarding the creation of a list that may be perceived as biased. However, the use of specific standardized criteria that reflect demonstrated prior criminal violence has been helpful in mitigating such potential criticisms of this strategy. Once agreed upon, the criteria for inclusion on the list may be shared with a broad range of criminal justice agencies and other stakeholders.

- What offenses are to be considered and how many are necessary for inclusion?

How are gun crimes to be defined? Do gun possession offenses count? Can someone qualify with only possession offenses? Is greater importance given to more serious crimes? In this regard, some jurisdictions have used a weighting or point system to assign more importance to more serious offenses. Others have used criteria that specify multiple offenses over a certain period of time (e.g., two or more gun offenses over a three year period). Regardless of the method used it is important that it be structured, systematic, consistent, and as clear as possible.

- Should the criteria be based upon arrests or convictions?

As with each of these issues there is no “right” answer. Some jurisdictions have opted for the more conservative approach, basing their criteria upon prior convictions for gun offenses. However, other districts have preferred to use multiple arrests for gun offenses as an indicator of ongoing involvement in gun crimes. While each jurisdiction must ultimately feel comfortable with the criteria they use for developing their list, it should be noted that “conviction only” lists may miss some serious offenders in a jurisdiction. Due to plea bargaining and trial delays, a serious violent gun offender may not be detected in a jurisdiction that is only utilizing convictions until he/she has done significant damage to that community.

- Timing of Offenses

While there certainly is a concern that the seriousness of the individual’s entire criminal history be considered, there is also a concern that those identified be active offenders. Thus, a number of jurisdictions have imposed additional criteria that involve more recent offenses. These may include having been arrested for a gun offense within the recent past (e.g., during the last two years), or having any arrest in the local area within a shorter period of time (such as over the last year).

- Creating Point Systems

Several jurisdictions have created a method to “score” the entire criminal history of an individual for prior violent offenses. The approach used in the Middle District of North Carolina involves the assignment of points for having certain types of felony convictions, with a total being calculated for each individual. Those that attain the highest scores are identified as the most violent offenders. The technique used in the Northern and Middle Districts of Georgia has involved the computation of a “seriousness score” based upon a system giving more weight to more serious prior offenses. Although varying in their complexity, one approach involves a direct additive method while the other is characterized by a slightly more complex weighting method; both of these strategies represent objective and systematic approaches assessing the entire criminal history of each individual to identify the most violent offenders in a jurisdiction.

**How large should the list be?** There is no specific answer to the question of list size. The list needs to be large enough to be meaningful for the gun violence reduction goal, but not so large that the criminal justice system cannot employ it efficiently. Overly large lists may be difficult to maintain, while overly small lists may be too restrictive and

omit offenders who should be included. One factor to consider is how information is to be communicated to those involved? In some jurisdictions, there is computer notification to officers upon their encounter with a chronic violent gun offender. In other jurisdictions, a paper list is maintained for reference by various individuals throughout the justice system. If the list is electronically communicated, more individuals can be included than if the list needs to be manually checked. In addition, if the list is too large, it may overwhelm the resources that are required for interventions and may even impact the credibility of the list by including individuals who may not belong on it. Another factor is the size of the jurisdiction. In some districts, there is a focus upon a small target area involving a small city or precinct. In these cases, the list may only involve a small number (e.g., 10-20) of “impact players.” In other jurisdictions, the focus has been on a large urban area or multiple cities within a district, where the number of offenders may number several hundred. As a general guide, the list needs to be large enough to be effectively and meaningfully used in the intervention but not so large that its usefulness is compromised.

**Number and Size of Jurisdictions Involved.** It is important to consider how the list will be used as it is being developed. In some districts, such as the Middle District of North Carolina, a number of nearby cities in a three county area have identified chronic violent gun offenders who may be active across these jurisdictions. In some large cities, where there is a principal focus upon certain neighborhoods or precincts, there have been efforts to identify individuals engaged in violent crimes within communities in areas that are geographically smaller but very densely populated. Perhaps most common is the development of a city- or county-wide intervention in which information is shared among agencies in this area. This determination should be based on the nature of the intervention as well as the technology involved in communicating information among participating agencies.

## **Methods of Constructing a Most Violent Gun Offender List—Sources of Information**

There are several important sources of information that are typically used to identify those individuals who are active gun offenders. As with other considerations, more than one way exists to approach this issue, and many jurisdictions have had success using a variety or a combination of different sources of information.

**Local Arrest Records.** Many jurisdictions have identified the most violent gun offenders from arrest records from local law enforcement. As discussed earlier, the use of arrests as an indicator of criminal history is more inclusive than using records of conviction. Thus, some districts have preferred to use criteria that include multiple arrests for

gun offenses as a better indicator of involvement in gun crimes than a single arrest.

The use of arrest records is not without its drawbacks. Many data systems do not indicate if the offense involved a gun (departments that have National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS)-compliant systems should all have such an indicator). Thus, a sizeable proportion of individuals with arrests for felonious or aggravated assaults may not be gun offenders. This situation can pose serious difficulties in the identification of gun offenders using only arrest records. In these situations, some jurisdictions have made an initial determination of potential gun offenders and then reviewed offense reports to verify that these offenses indeed did involve a gun.

**Statewide Criminal History Records.** Although less commonly used, another source of data is the state criminal history data system. A particular advantage of this source of information is that it will include offenses that did not occur within the local jurisdiction for a more complete view of the individual's entire criminal history. In addition, data from this source will include convictions as well as arrests, allowing for the use of offense convictions as a criterion for inclusion. This source of information will also contain the current status of the offender. Thus, those offenders who would qualify for inclusion, but who are currently incarcerated, can be identified and excluded. In addition, individuals who are currently on probation or parole or have outstanding warrants can also be identified.

In many jurisdictions it may be difficult to obtain state criminal history data in a form that can be used for this purpose. When such data are available, they may be very cumbersome to analyze due to the size of the data files and may require expertise that may not be readily available. In addition, the information that is contained will not indicate if guns were involved in the offense. As is the case with the use of local arrest records, a secondary step may be necessary to verify that there is, in fact, a history of criminal use of guns.

**Law Enforcement Intelligence.** Some of the best examples in the identification of active gun offenders involve the integration of a comprehensive review of arrests—to identify those who have historically been involved in gun violence—with law enforcement intelligence to identify those who are known to be currently active offenders. Through this combination of the application of specific criminal history criteria with “street knowledge” regarding the current situation, a group of offenders can be identified who are likely impact players in the particular jurisdiction.

**Incident Reviews.** Another popular PSN strategy is incident reviews. This PSN component typically involves a systematic review of open as well as closed cases involving serious gun crimes (e.g., homicides) in a meeting of law enforcement and in some cases, correctional

personnel, from various local, state, and federal agencies and divisions within agencies (e.g., gang unit, narcotics, homicide, and precincts). The discussion in these meetings focuses upon a detailed examination of the collective knowledge about these incidents including the circumstances, locations, motivations, victims, offenders or suspects, and their associates. While there is a concern for solving open cases, the principal focus of these reviews is upon generating knowledge about patterns of gun crimes that can be used for developing proactive strategies and interventions to disrupt these patterns and prevent further violence. One such strategy involves the identification of individuals and groups that are frequently associated with gun violence across multiple incidents. This intelligence can then be incorporated with other data in the identification of a jurisdiction's most violent gun offenders.

For example, through the homicide incident review process in Indianapolis, it was determined that a group of individuals, although not identified as the principal offenders, were consistently found to be associated with multiple homicides and to be playing a major role in these offenses. These individuals were then included in the Violence Impact Program—Enhanced Response (VIPER) program that identified the impact players in gun crimes and served to focus enforcement and prosecution efforts in this jurisdiction.

### **Validity of Information and Maintaining the List**

Given that this information will form the basis of enforcement and prosecution efforts, it is critical that it be accurate. Once data have been analyzed and integrated with intelligence it is important that what has been produced be critically examined. Has this process identified offenders who fit with the objective criteria that guided this strategy? Do these offenders in fact warrant the intensive efforts that will be associated with this PSN component?

Once accuracy has been determined, it is critical that the information contained be current. It will be also be important to ascertain the current correctional status of these offenders. Which of these individuals are currently under correctional supervision? Knowing which offenders may currently be in prison will also allow for the design of reentry strategies for this population. In addition, knowledge of the probation and parole status of these offenders should provide for various “lever pulling” strategies based upon their supervision status.

An additional factor that should be considered is when to remove someone from the chronic violent gun offender list. In some cases, individuals who were previously involved in violence “go straight.” This may be due to family support, employment, participation in a service program, (e.g. substance abuse, life skills), or for many other reasons. Jurisdictions should have a mechanism to remove individuals from their list if, for example, the person has not been active for some



period of time. This also can serve as an incentive to offenders that if they turn their life around, they can avoid high-level scrutiny from criminal justice agencies.

Finally, it will also be important to verify additional information regarding these offenders. Do they currently have outstanding warrants? Are they suspects in ongoing investigations? Is the current address of record accurate? These are all important to the validation of the information about these offenders.

### **Communication of Information**

As this strategy is being implemented it will be necessary to determine how information will be communicated among those agencies, units, and individuals involved. In some jurisdictions it has been possible to communicate that a particular offender is on the list through a modification of the computer assisted dispatch (CAD) system that notifies officers upon their encounter with one of these offenders. This is obviously important for officer safety concerns, but it also can be used to gather immediate intelligence regarding encounters with chronic violent gun offenders and their ongoing involvement with criminal activity.

In other jurisdictions, the use of this technology has not been feasible and paper copies of the chronic violent gun offender list have been distributed to relevant enforcement and prosecution units. In such jurisdictions, these lists are reviewed as encounters and arrests are made so that cases involving these offenders receive appropriate attention according to the intervention design. If possible, having photos available as part of the paper (or electronic) lists makes the information much more useful to street level law enforcement officers.

In a small number of jurisdictions, for example the Northern and Middle Districts of Georgia, a web-based application has been designed for law enforcement access that provides an indication of the criminal history, correctional status, and warrant information for individuals meeting the criteria for inclusion.

Finally, it is important to continually update these lists. Situations change, offenders are incarcerated, and new offenders become active; it is important to have a regular process of updating a jurisdiction's chronic violent gun offender list and communicating this information to all relevant agencies.

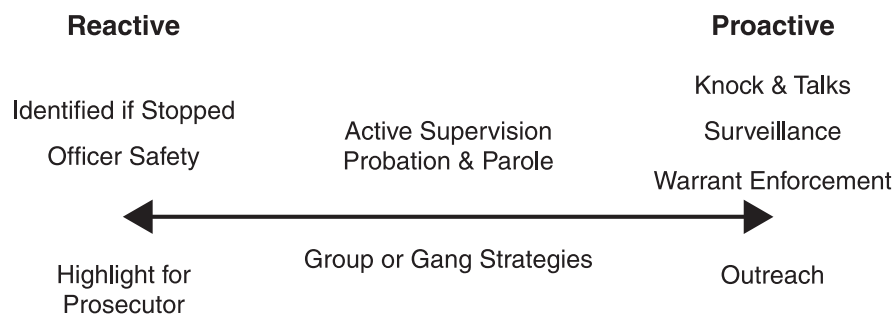
## Operational Uses for Chronic Violent Gun Offender Lists

The material presented thus far has described the various approaches to and considerations involved in identifying the most violent gun offenders in a jurisdiction. While these issues are of considerable importance, the power of this strategy lies in the effective use of this information. Regardless of the care that is exercised in the identification process, these strategies will only have an impact if they are effectively integrated with law enforcement and prosecution procedures. The following sections will describe various strategies for using chronic violent gun offender lists within an overall PSN strategy. As with all PSN initiatives, the specific design of the intervention should reflect the nature of the local gun violence problem and should be tailored to the characteristics of the jurisdiction. The following discussion will chronicle the development and implementation of this strategy in several jurisdictions to illustrate the integration of this information with agency operations.

### Proactive or Reactive Focus

One of the key decisions to be made in the implementation of this strategy is whether these lists are to be used reactively or proactively. Reactive approaches are initiated once the offender has been apprehended or encountered through routine law enforcement operations such as a traffic stop, while proactive approaches involve the initiation of investigations and other enforcement strategies focusing upon individuals identified through this strategy. St. Louis has adopted a principally reactive strategy in its most violent offender program known locally as “WOW” (Worst Of the Worst). When an individual is identified in a traffic or other stop, a “flag” is displayed through the CAD system. This notifies officers that the individual is a “person of interest” for involvement in prior gun violence and is a potential threat to officer safety. The officer is then required to immediately submit a field intelligence report to the WOW program coordinator.

The most-violent offender strategy in Indianapolis has two components, the first is the “VIPER” list that is used in a reactive manner similar to the approach in St. Louis. In addition, the “Super Achilles” program involves a proactive approach in which a small multi-agency enforcement unit actively seeks out individuals who have been identified as being significantly involved in gun violence in the jurisdiction. In general, proactive approaches can focus upon only a limited number of offenders (e.g., 10-12) given the intensive investigative, intelligence, and enforcement actions that are involved. Figure 1 presents a representation of the continuum of these reactive and proactive strategies. Reactive components are activated once the individual is encountered through the routine operation of the criminal justice system. These would include activation of particular procedures upon arrest through

**Figure 1: Violent Gun Offender Strategies**

prosecution so that the case is highlighted for a more focused effort. Proactive strategies would include such activities as investigation of cold cases, enforcement of outstanding warrants, and other investigative and enforcement strategies focusing upon these individuals.

### Should Offenders be Notified of their Inclusion?

One of the key operational issues that must be confronted early in the implementation of this strategy is whether or not offenders (and the public) should be notified that they have been identified as a chronic violent offender. There are a number of tactical and strategic considerations that come into play in this decision. On one hand, some jurisdictions may have concerns about revealing the identities of these offenders to the public for fear of accusations of profiling. Thus, it is important to establish that the criteria for inclusion are empirically justifiable; that is, criteria cannot be based solely upon “nominations,” but must have an objective basis. On the other hand, in the case of a reactive approach, it may be more effective to make such lists public. This can be done through postings of lists at police stations or substations, probation or parole offices, or community centers. Making the list public increases the chances that citizens will provide information on such individuals. However, it also serves another purpose consistent with PSN: it enhances the deterrence message. By letting offenders know that they are on such a list, they are put on notice that they will be monitored and held accountable for their behavior. The Rochester, New York, NOSE (Notification Of Special Enforcement) program takes such an approach.

On the other hand, some jurisdictions have chosen not to publicize the identities of chronic violent gun offenders. The obvious reason for selecting this approach is to avoid “tipping off” offenders that they are being watched so as to increase the chances for apprehension. The WOW program in St. Louis has taken this approach.

### **Integration with Patrol Operations**

Given the large volume of police-citizen contacts through traffic and pedestrian stops and other routine law enforcement activities, the significant involvement of patrol with chronic violent gun offender strategies is an important operational consideration in implementing this strategy. An important benefit of the involvement of patrols with most violent gun offender programs is enhancing officer safety. Through general dissemination of this information and/or through a notification procedure when one of these offenders is encountered, officers are alerted to the fact that these individuals have a history of gun violence and should be handled with extra caution. In addition, the leads and information that can be developed about these offenders from the “eyes and ears” of patrol are considerable, given the frequent encounters on the street between law enforcement and the public.

The principal challenge in involving patrol in this strategy is how to communicate the information. Perhaps the most efficient method is notification through the departmental computer system once an individual (or address) is encountered on the street, similar to the procedure followed in St. Louis. However, not all agencies have the technological capability to do this. Jurisdictions without the necessary technology, such as the Southern District of Illinois, have created paper lists of chronic violent gun offenders, often including photos and a description of their criminal history, probation or parole status, and any outstanding warrants. As noted previously, if this latter method is employed, a smaller number of offenders will be able to be included, given the difficulty of disseminating and maintaining the list.

### **Integration with Prosecution**

Similarly, for this strategy to be effective it is critical that there be significant involvement from local and federal prosecution. The coordination of state and federal prosecution is an important element of PSN (see Case Study 1, Gun Prosecution Case Screening). It is important that prosecutors be included in this strategy from its initiation. Prosecutors can give critical input on the legality of inclusion of certain criteria, can provide background information on offenders, and can help craft more successful prosecution strategies if they are involved in the evolution of this intervention from its inception. It is critical that prosecutors be intimately involved in the strategy in order that they can modify agency procedures to ensure that enhanced prosecutorial attention is focused upon the cases involving these offenders.

In Indianapolis, prosecutors are an integral component of the VIPER initiative. As cases are presented from defendants classified as VIPER offenders, the case file is marked as being in the program so that the prosecutors know that this is a high rate gun offender and that increased attention is required in this case. Results from this initiative

indicated that these cases were much more likely to be successfully prosecuted than had been traditionally the case.

### **Integration with Probation and Parole**

Probation and parole agencies can also take an important role in most violent gun offender strategies. Depending upon the criteria that are used in identifying offenders, it is conceivable that a number of individuals identified will currently be under correctional supervision. In such cases enhanced supervision programs may be implemented for these individuals.

Probation and parole officers also have extensive knowledge about offenders, their associates, and their patterns, routines, and activities. Such information can be helpful both in identifying offenders for inclusion as well as serving as a source of intelligence to assist in enforcement activities. The sharing and use of such information is yet another example of how the collaborative activities integral to the PSN strategy can enhance the response to gun crime in a jurisdiction. Probation and parole officers can play an especially effective role in proactive responses, such as the Super Achilles initiative in Indianapolis.

Finally, probation and parole officers can also be helpful in communicating with the offender. Frequently probation or parole officers have some regular contact with the offenders and during this contact they can help communicate the deterrence message that the jurisdiction wants to send.

### **Integration with Other Initiatives**

One of the key lessons learned from PSN is the “value added” gained from integrating strategic efforts with other interventions in the jurisdiction. There are numerous federal initiatives that can be used in conjunction with a most violent gun offender program. Weed and Seed neighborhoods have residents who are mobilized to know their neighbors and are significantly involved with law enforcement in their communities. In addition, local programs funded through the Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program, Juvenile Accountability Incentive Block Grants (JAIBG), or Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) grants may have created other local programs that may be able to be a part of a chronic violent gun offender strategy through providing intelligence, personnel, or other resources.

In addition, it is important that the chronic violent gun offender strategy be integrated with other PSN initiatives. Many districts have implemented incident reviews, offender notification meetings, and prosecution screening strategies as components of PSN. Each of these approaches can enhance a chronic violent gun offender program. As was noted earlier, incident reviews can be used in the identification of offenders to be included in this initiative. Offender notification meet-

ings can be held with chronic gun offenders who are under correctional supervision to reinforce the deterrence message as well as provide assistance in their adjustment to the community. In addition, chronic violent offender programs need to be fully integrated with the screening of gun cases for prosecution for the efficient operation of this strategy.

## Additional Implementation Issues

### Organizational Contexts

There are a number of other factors that will affect how a chronic violent gun offender strategy can be implemented. The size of a jurisdiction, the nature of the gun violence problem, the relationships among criminal justice agency partners, and the other existing strategies and interventions in the jurisdiction are key determinants of what a strategy will look like. As with other PSN interventions, it important to stress that these strategies must be crafted to reflect local crime and criminal justice characteristics and that they cannot simply be imported “as is” from another jurisdiction.

*Agency size* is a key determinant regarding how a chronic violent gun offender strategy can be implemented. The complexity of relationships and communications in very large jurisdictions can make the task of organizing such a strategy quite difficult. Thus, in some large jurisdictions, identification of most violent gun offenders has been conducted for smaller areas (e.g., precincts) within the larger jurisdiction. In smaller jurisdictions, however, members of the task force may have ongoing working relationships, but may lack resources for a substantial intervention. In such situations, a smaller intervention focusing heavily upon communicating information in a reactive strategy, such as coordinating responses upon encounters with chronic violent gun offenders, would be most appropriate.

Another ingredient that will undoubtedly shape the nature of the intervention is the *level of technology* available in the jurisdiction. Jurisdictions with an advanced record management system that is integrated across local police agencies will have an advantage in this regard. With this technology, jurisdictions will have the ability to analyze data to identify characteristics of offenders who merit the additional scrutiny brought about through this intervention. In addition, advanced technology will afford the opportunity to communicate this information more effectively and to integrate this strategy more seamlessly with ongoing operations. This is particularly important for informing patrol officers of the identity of these offenders once a street encounter has been initiated.

A key to the successful integration and operation of a most-violent gun offender strategy is having strong and consistent *leadership*. There

needs to be an individual who is responsible for making the overall strategy work, coordinating relationships with other agencies and with multiple units within an agency, and seeing that the intervention makes it over the rough spots. It is inevitable in any organization that difficulties will be encountered during the course of the program. Personalities, agency boundaries, mission creep, limited resources, and a host of other difficulties can occur that can sidetrack even the most successful and carefully designed intervention.<sup>9</sup> Identifying an individual who can manage the strategy, articulate its vision, and be its champion within and external to the agency is critical to the success of the strategy.

In addition, there should be an individual who has principal responsibility for overseeing the day-to-day operations and management of the program. This individual would be responsible for maintaining and verifying the information that is contained in the list and for routine communication concerning activities integral to the strategy. Without this “hands on” oversight it is highly likely that the strategy will not receive the attention that it requires to be successful. For example, in the Eastern District of Missouri, there is a full-time sergeant in the major crimes investigative unit of the St. Louis Police Department assigned to oversee the WOW program.

As with any new strategy, *personnel turnover* is a crucial issue and one has to be concerned when individuals in key positions are transferred, promoted, or retire. The criminal justice literature is replete with examples of promising interventions that fall apart when key personnel leave. This suggests that institutionalizing this approach, indeed as with all PSN strategies, is critical to its long term survival and the overall success of PSN. For a chronic violent gun offender program to be successful it is not only important to have competent personnel fulfilling these key roles, but it is necessary that the intervention be integrated into and seen as part of the normal way of doing business in the jurisdiction. When this takes place the potential impact of personnel turnover will be minimized.

All of the case studies in this series have stressed that PSN and its intervention strategies are not simply pieces of software to be plugged into a district. Each intervention must fit into the larger culture of organizations and agencies in a particular jurisdiction. In addition, the intervention strategies must be adapted to the nature of the local firearm crime problem and criminal justice system. After all, the nature of the gun violence problem as well as the experience and cultures of agencies working together vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, and it can't be reasonably expected that a single strategy will work the same in all jurisdictions.

### **Impediments to Implementation**

There are a number of impediments to successfully integrating and maintaining a chronic violent gun offender strategy. Law enforcement

is a dynamic profession, with changing demands and resources. Law enforcement leadership often changes, political climates change, officers get promoted or transferred, and crime priorities can be redefined. As a consequence, it can be reasonably anticipated that over time there will be several challenges to establishing and institutionalizing this strategy. In St. Louis, for example, eight of the twelve officers assigned to the WOW program were either promoted or transferred within a two year period.<sup>10</sup> Other jurisdictions have experienced the transfer of key supervisory personnel and their replacements did not share their commitment and support for the strategy. Therefore, it is essential not only to identify key individuals who can make the program work, but also to institutionalize these changes and to have the chronic violent gun offender strategy become a part of the normal way of doing business.

Efforts to implement new models of operations are often met with resistance within organizations, as entrenched practices are difficult to modify. Institutions resist change, are often slow to adapt to new challenges, and often lack an adaptive infrastructure. As decades of criminal justice research have demonstrated, these circumstances are particularly relevant for understanding how we respond to crime. One of the key legacies of PSN is the change that it promotes among criminal justice agencies, a legacy that emphasizes partnerships, communication, and strategic approaches to gun violence problems. Indeed the ability to overcome organizational resistance and inertia to maintain the status quo is a key step in establishing a new way of doing business under the framework of PSN.

### **Community Involvement**

This case study would be remiss if it failed to note the role that the community can take in developing and implementing successful chronic violent gun offender strategies. Community residents can both promote an understanding of the mission of the strategy and provide information to those programs adopting a proactive approach.

In addition, some residents of high crime neighborhoods may be concerned that these strategies constitute racial profiling or discriminatory practices. It is important to address such perceptions with information about how these programs operate and a demonstration that this process is based upon objective criteria. Indeed, in communities where rates of victimization are the highest, many community residents seek greater involvement with the police. If law enforcement can effectively demonstrate that it is making a strategic and well-designed effort to reduce crime through identifying the highest rate gun offenders who present a real threat to the community, it is more likely to successfully enlist the support of residents.

The District of Massachusetts has actively involved community residents in its Impact Player initiative. Through meeting with community



residents and discussing individuals who have been identified through the analysis of their offense histories, additional information about their current status and activities has been obtained. In this manner, these meetings served as validity checks to determine from the community if these individuals were continuing activities detrimental to community safety.

## Impact of Chronic Violent Gun Offender Strategies

This PSN strategy is relatively new and thus it has not been operational long enough for outcome studies to be completed. However, some preliminary information is available from an assessment of the WOW program in St. Louis. This initiative reported impressive results for its initial year of operation in 2004. From investigation and enforcement actions relative to the 100 individuals designated as WOW offenders, there were 170 arrests (including associates). Eighty-one of the 100 individuals on the list were arrested on 356 charges at some point during the year. Prosecutors filed charges on 294 of these offenses, including 136 violent crimes. Perhaps most impressively, 69 of these cases were taken federally and 98 guns were seized. Of the offenders arrested, 13 were wanted for homicide offenses and 41 were wanted for first degree assault or armed criminal action. In addition, 57 cars were seized in these arrests. This appears to be clear evidence of the utility of such an approach for dealing with violent gun crime.

## Summary

Like most PSN strategies, interventions directed toward chronic violent gun offenders represent a challenge to criminal justice “business as usual.” PSN represents a fundamental change in the way that law enforcement interacts with prosecution, the way that state and federal agencies relate to each other, and the way in which problems and responses are defined. PSN is built on a platform of inter-agency cooperation and strategic thinking. It requires a commitment to change. While change is difficult and often threatening, keeping the problem clearly defined and in sight is the key to any successful PSN strategy. For some jurisdictions, the problem definition may lead the task force to conclude that a chronic violent gun offender strategy is not necessary or likely to be successful. But in those jurisdictions where the problem identification and definition shows that such a strategy is important, chronic offender interventions should be adopted and maintained as a high priority. The PSN Task Force in each jurisdiction has a key role to play in this effort. But the task forces are not alone, and should know that they can call on each other for help. In particular, it is appropriate to seek information and assistance from those districts that have been successful in designing and implementing

such a strategy. The following section presents specific local examples of the implementation and operation of a range of most-violent gun offender programs.

## **Descriptions of Chronic Violent Gun Offender Strategies**

### **Eastern District of Missouri—WOW Program**

#### **Development**

The Most Violent Gun Offender Program in St. Louis, known locally as the WOW (Worst Of the Worst) program, began as a component of the St. Louis Ceasefire Initiative. This interagency coalition approach to reducing gun violence involved an array of enforcement and prevention strategies conducted by criminal justice agencies and community partners. The focus of this initiative is identifying, apprehending, and prosecuting the individuals representing the greatest threats to public safety in St. Louis.

WOW is based on the concept as well as data analysis that suggest that a small fraction of offenders is engaged in a large volume of offending, and that by going after these individuals with vertical prosecution, vigorous summons, and warrant enforcement, as well as attention from multiple law enforcement groups (federal and local, as well as gang, drug, and tactical units within the police department) a reduction in violent gun crime could be attained.

Several factors led to the early development of this program. First, in reviewing arrest and assault data it was observed that many names appeared multiple times across various cases. The role of the individual may have varied across cases; that is, in some cases the individual was an offender while in others the person may have been an intended victim, a suspect, or present at the scene of the crime. Second, it was learned that at other sites, particularly Indianapolis, focusing upon individuals who were associated with multiple incidents of violence had proved fruitful. Third, data analysis confirmed that a small number of individuals were associated with a large number of violent incidents.

It was initially decided to focus upon individuals who had been identified as being involved in criminal incidents whose arrest warrants had been “taken under advisement.” In most cases these warrants were refused due to witnesses or victims not being willing to testify in the case or that there were direct associations between the victim and the offender leading the victim to also not desire to testify.

**Criteria**

Although this intervention initially focused upon individuals identified through this review of denied arrest warrants, it quickly adopted a broader focus with established criteria used to determine eligibility for inclusion. While individuals can be identified through a number of sources and most are initially identified through law enforcement intelligence, individuals included must meet at least two of the following characteristics:

- Two arrests for first degree assault and armed criminal action.
- Six or more state level arrests within the last nine months.
- Be a documented gang member.
- Was on probation when arrested for most recent state level arrest.
- Two or more felony convictions.

**Operations**

A sergeant in the major crimes division of the St. Louis Police Department has the principal responsibility for coordinating the activities and components of the WOW initiative. This individual is dedicated to these activities on a full time basis and is responsible for maintaining the list and communicating information to the various agencies involved in the initiative.

The operation of the WOW program contains both proactive and reactive components. Once an individual receives the WOW designation, the department creates a flag in its data base reflecting this designation. When an officer makes a computer inquiry regarding this individual, the response indicates that this individual has this designation as a most violent individual. The officer is first warned to be cautious around this individual as there is a history of gun violence, and second, this encounter is to be immediately followed by a report to relevant units in the department including the WOW program coordinator.

If the individual has active warrants, there is a concerted effort to seek out the person and bring them in to face these outstanding charges. In addition, the prior offenses of the individual are reviewed to determine if additional investigation of the offenses in which there was no conviction may be suitable for further investigation. A police officer assigned on rotation to the U.S. Attorney's Office as part of PSN has been assigned to investigate these cases and provide information to state and federal prosecutors regarding potential prosecution of these individuals.

Meetings are held on a regular basis for those involved in the WOW program to review the status of activities regarding cases and investigations of WOW offenders. This includes state and federal prosecutors as

well as representatives from various police units to ensure that arrests of these individuals receive enhanced attention as they progress through the system.

In addition, an e-mail system has been created to provide ongoing communication among police and prosecutors regarding the current status of these cases and notification of arrests or successful prosecution of these cases. The distribution of these e-mails includes not only those immediately involved in the investigation and prosecution but also patrol officers who may have been involved in these cases to acknowledge their contributions to this effort. This distribution of information along with the officer rotation in the U.S. Attorney's Office has contributed greatly to the recognition of and knowledge about the WOW program throughout the criminal justice system in St. Louis.

### **Results**

There were 100 individuals identified and labeled as WOW offenders during the initial year of program operation. Eighty-one of the 100 individuals were arrested on a total of 356 charges, including 136 violent crimes. Sixty-nine of these individuals were prosecuted federally. Although the direct linkage cannot be conclusively established at this time, during this period of time there was also a dramatic reduction of violent crime in St. Louis, particularly homicide and gun assaults.

## **Southern District of Indiana (Indianapolis)— VIPER Program**

### **Development**

The VIPER (Violence Impact Program—Enhanced Response) Program was created under the Indianapolis Violence Reduction Program (IVRP), which was a precursor to PSN and embodied the same strategic approach to reducing gun violence. This initiative was based upon early findings from research on homicides in Indianapolis that many victims and offenders had extensive criminal histories. This led to a discussion regarding the need to identify chronic violent offenders and intervene with these individuals prior to their involvement in a subsequent violent crime.

Individuals were identified for the VIPER designation through analysis of local criminal history records, specifically selecting those individuals who had the greatest number of arrests for violent offenses.

### **Criteria**

The criteria used for identifying VIPER offenders involved searching the local arrest records to identify those individuals having multiple arrests for violent offenses. Specifically an individual has to be

between 18 and 30 years old and have two arrests for any of the following felony offenses:

- Murder, attempted murder, voluntary or involuntary manslaughter, or reckless homicide.
- Robbery.
- Felonious assault or battery.
- Carjacking.
- Rape, sexual battery, or child molestation.
- Weapons offenses (felon in possession, sawed-off shotgun, unlawful use of body armor, possession of machine gun, or bomb).
- Criminal recklessness.

Juveniles who have been waived to adult court who also meet the other criteria may also be eligible for the VIPER designation. Through the application of these criteria 270 individuals were initially identified. As the initiative has continued to operate, approximately 200 individuals are identified as VIPER offenders at any one time.

### **Operation**

There are four broad components of the VIPER initiative:

- Identification of the most violent adult and juvenile offenders.
- Aggressive prosecution at the state and federal level of chronic violent offenders.
- Aggressive enforcement of illegal use, possession, and purchase of firearms.
- Intensive parole and probation supervision of VIPER offenders.

Each of these components has a proactive as well as reactive strategy emphasizing active investigation of individuals designated as VIPER offenders. Further, the VIPER “tag” has become widely recognized throughout Indianapolis’ criminal justice system and individuals across agencies understand that a specific set of procedures are to be followed when a case is encountered involving one of these offenders. For example, as a person is identified by a patrol officer a designation pops up on the mobile data terminal in the car. In addition, as cases of these individuals reach the prosecutor’s office, the files are stamped with a VIPER designation indicating that extra caution should be exercised with these cases and they should receive high priority processing.

It is important that each of the components be coordinated and integrated with the others. Thus, there are regularly scheduled

meetings among the agencies to discuss the progress of investigation of these cases.

In addition, the list is regularly reviewed by the coordinator within the Indianapolis Police Department to ensure that the list is current and that individuals who have been incarcerated or are deceased are removed from the list. In addition, if there has been no criminal activity (as indicated by arrests) for several years, the individual is removed from the list.

### **Results**

A review of those on active VIPER status indicated that the 254 offenders on the list at the time of review had almost 4,000 arrests. Of these arrests, 133 were for homicide and there were over 700 arrests for firearm offenses. These offenders had an average of 16 arrests overall and an average of 8 arrests for violent offenses. Thus, this procedure did result in the identification of a group of individuals who were truly chronic violent offenders. An overall assessment of the operation of the VIPER initiative indicated that there was increased intensity of prosecution and enforcement activities for homicide and firearms offenses. In a follow-up of those individuals who were subjected to VIPER sanctions, 68 percent had no arrests in a follow-up period, compared to 30 percent of individuals with similar offense histories who did not receive a VIPER designation and sanctions.<sup>11</sup>

### **Project Super Achilles**

As an outgrowth of the success of the VIPER initiative, the Southern District of Indiana PSN task force created a multi-agency law enforcement team to focus upon a much smaller number of known violent offenders. The specific goal of this unit is to reduce homicides through focusing upon removing illegal guns from the street.

The unit was created in September 2004 and is coordinated by a sergeant from the Indianapolis Police Department (IPD). The unit includes four Indianapolis patrol officers (one each from the four largest police districts) as well as two detectives from other investigative units within IPD. In addition, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and the U.S. Marshals Service have each assigned to agents to the unit.

The focus of this unit is on investigation and apprehension of known chronic violent offenders in Marion County who have been associated with homicides and other serious violent crimes involving firearms. Activities are directed through intelligence from a variety of sources, including: PSN homicide and other incident reviews; homicide units; IPD Assault, Robbery, Sex Crimes, and Narcotics units; the Safe Streets Task Force; IPD District investigations units; and straw purchase information from ATF, as well as other law enforcement sources.

From this intelligence, this unit has created the Top Ten Program which involves the formation of a list of the top ten offenders in various categories including the top ten most wanted individuals, the top ten probation and parole offenders, and the top ten offenders within various “hot zones” that have been identified from crime analysis. Investigative and enforcement actions are then guided by this information.

## **District of Massachusetts—Impact Players**

### **Development**

The Boston Police Department (BPD) has employed a targeted intervention approach that focuses on a small set of individuals most involved in violence for more than a decade. That approach is now an integral component of PSN. Research in the 1990s by Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government and BPD concluded that a small number of individuals were responsible for a disproportionate amount of the violence in the city. In addition, this research indicated that often offenders and victims of violence came from the same pool of individuals. This research noted that those who were arrested as offenders one day were likely to show up as victims in the near future.

Based on this realization, BPD with its partner agencies created a number of programs targeted to this high-risk group. Operation Nightlight and Operation Ceasefire were both examples of programs intended to send a specific deterrence message combined with an opportunity for youths to avail themselves of violence prevention services from a wide variety of agencies.

This approach has continued to evolve over time as BPD used additional strategies to identify the highest risk individuals causing violence in the neighborhoods of the city. BPD identifies these individuals as “Impact Players.” The most recent approach employed by BPD to identify impact players rejects an approach that relies strictly on the number of prior arrests as the sole defining criteria. The leadership of the BPD believes that this may be a good starting point, but street intelligence and community input also make a useful list. By using simply the number of prior arrests, BPD believes that it may miss some impact players who have not yet been arrested enough times to meet a particular criminal history threshold. In addition, it believes that sometimes offenders who have a number of prior arrests may be attempting to turn their life around, and in those cases these individuals should be provided access to support services to help them in their ongoing transition.

It is also important to note that the lists developed by BPD contain a large number of individuals who the police believe could be helped by intervention and prevention programs. Being on the impact player list in Boston does not assure that offenders will receive increased enforcement attention. Being an impact player in Boston means that offenders could make a negative impact on the community, and the

goal is to prevent individuals from doing just that. For most individuals on the impact player list, the BPD would recommend prevention or intervention services limiting enforcement actions to impact players who continue to be involved in violence.

Most recently the BPD has developed a strategy that focuses on high risk families. Through research conducted in house and with partner agencies, the BPD has documented that a small number of families are also associated with a disproportionate amount of crime in the city. The analysis revealed that some of these families had multiple generations of serious violent criminals. The approach to these targeted families was similar to the approach used with individual impact players: offer support services to all family members but focus high level enforcement activity on those family members who continue to engage in violence. In addition, these analyses have identified some individuals who are at the highest risk in the city; these are family members who have not become involved in crime while many of their family members are active criminals. These highest risk family members have been singled out for intensive support services.

### **Criteria**

The most recent impact player list contained approximately 800 names. The list was generated by a coalition of agency representatives including representatives from the Youth Violence Strike Force, the school police, the Department of Youth Services (DYS), probation, parole, the Boston Housing Authority Police, and the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office. In addition to the enforcement agencies mentioned above, the group receives input from members of the city's streetworker program and case managers from Youth Opportunity Boston, a city-run program that works with high risk youth.

The original list is generated from the files of the BPD and reflects known offenders who are involved with drugs, gangs, or guns. The list is then reviewed by the partner agencies and they can suggest modifications to the list. For example a probation officer may suggest that a client should be added to the list based on some intelligence about the recent criminal behavior they have developed. On the other hand, a DYS caseworker might add information about a youth on the list, such as the fact the youth has recently re-enrolled in school and seems to be getting his or her life together, and that might result in the youth being removed from the list.

The criteria for placement on the list include:

- Youth who are known to the police to be involved in drugs, gangs, or guns.



- Youth who are identified as actively involved in drugs, gangs, or firearm violence by probation, parole, or the Department of Youth Services.
- Youth identified by the schools, Youth Opportunity Boston, or other community-based organizations as youth who are not involved with the criminal justice system but are at risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of violence due to their activity or associates.
- At-risk youth who may be siblings of impact players or have demonstrated an interest in gangs, guns, or drugs at an early age, or those who have tertiary connections to the above-mentioned groups.

### **Operations**

Once this group of 800 impact players was identified each young person was targeted as most in need of prevention, intervention, or enforcement actions.

It has been the case with the present list and in the past that the vast majority of those offenders placed on the impact player list are targeted for prevention or intervention actions. In a recent list, for example, only about 20 percent of the impact players were judged to be in need of direct enforcement actions, while the remaining 80 percent were targeted for prevention or enforcement actions.

The prevention activities included home visits by area clergy or offender notification meetings for those about to be released from the Suffolk County House of Correction or State's Division of Youth Services.

The intervention activities for those young people who are deemed to be in need of services include: Nightlight visits to the young person's home by teams of probation and police officers, school presentations targeted directly to those impact players who are attending a particular school, or participation in the Suffolk County District Attorney's "Understanding Violence Program," which presents selected individuals with a curriculum that deals with the consequences of violence.

Impact players who are deemed in need of direct enforcement activity are subject to warrant sweeps if they have outstanding warrants, targeted investigations of any criminal activity, and, once arrested, referral for federal prosecution.

In one example, a local service provider was notified that a small number of its clients were on the list of 800. In this case, the agency was encouraged to work even more closely with these individuals and to notify them that they were on the list and they should be very careful about their own activities and those with whom they associate.

## Northern and Middle Districts of Georgia

### Development

The Northern and Middle Districts of Georgia have based their most violent offender programs on the state criminal history records. These records provide a broader consideration of the total criminal history of the offender than is available just from local arrest records. In addition, this data source provides the current status of the offender (e.g., on probation, in prison, outstanding warrants). The research partner (the same for both districts) had considerable experience in working with these data and in previous projects had merged the state's criminal history, corrections, and parole data into a single database.

The foundation of this initiative, known locally as ELIMICON, was based upon identifying those offenders who are at the greatest risk of committing future violent crimes as reflected in a composite description of their prior offending. This project represents a unique application of criminal history records. The use of these data in most jurisdictions is limited to checking individual records of arrestees or suspects. The research partner, working in conjunction with the state criminal justice data repository and the criminal justice state planning agency, created an offender based research version of this database that would allow the application of specific criteria to identify those individuals with specific criminal backgrounds that represented the highest risk offenders. Rather than having each record in the database represent a criminal incident, the new database was constructed with each record representing an individual offender to facilitate the necessary analysis.

### Criteria

The task force in each district identified specific violent offenses that were of principal concern and set criteria for defining a chronic violent offender in the district. This was based upon the identification of a specific set of violent and gun offenses in each district. These were the "qualifying" offenses because an offender had to have at least one of these offenses to be considered. There were 16 such offenses identified by the Atlanta task force and 19 by the Macon task force (in addition to any firearms offense).

Another criterion was that these individuals still be active offenders in the area. Thus, there had to be at least one arrest in the past 12 months in Atlanta for the Northern District and in Macon for the Middle District.

From the task force deliberations, the following criteria were identified as necessary to identify the most violent offenders in the district:

- Being arrested in the past year for any offense in Atlanta (Northern District of Georgia) or Macon (Middle District of Georgia).

- The offender has three or more violent arrests in his or her lifetime.
- Two or more of these arrests occurred in the past five years.
- The offender has at least one conviction for a violent offense in his or her lifetime.

The application of these criteria resulted in the identification of 271 offenders in Atlanta and 235 offenders in Macon. Consistent with other research, a small proportion of all offenders were identified as being among this violent career criminal group. Only 2 percent of the individuals arrested during the previous year fit the qualifying criteria for a chronic violent offender.

This list of qualifying offenders was then merged with corrections data to identify those offenders who were currently incarcerated in state prisons or who were currently on probation or parole. The final list of offenders was then reviewed by the task force and validated using intelligence sources and individual record checks.

### **Operations**

The operational component of this initiative is based around distribution of this information through a secure web server with access limited to law enforcement agencies as approved by the PSN task force. This approach solves the dilemma of distribution of paper lists and the coordination of current information about these offenders. Current information about each individual is routinely updated so that valid information is available. In addition, the screen for each individual offender presents not only his or her criminal history but other relevant information from his or her files that is useful for law enforcement operations as well as officer safety concerns. For example, this information contains the most recent photograph of the individual.

Enforcement activities are being designed around the use of this information by PSN enforcement units. In addition, the PSN task force is developing specific geographically based interventions with communities having concentrations of violent offenders.



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## Endnotes

1. Bureau of Justice Statistics: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjc/cvict\\_c.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjc/cvict_c.htm) (as of 12/28/04).

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 United States. See Zimring and Hawkins, 1999; Bureau of Justice Statistics: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/ijs.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/ijs.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 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. The classic Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin (1972) research found that 6 percent of boys in Philadelphia would accumulate five or more police contacts. The Schumacher and Kurz (2000) research in Orange County, CA., found that 8 percent of youth accounted for a large fraction of violence, and each had four or more court referrals.

9. See Decker and Rosenfield, 2004.

10. Of course, one of the good things about successful programs like the St. Louis WOW program is that officers have an opportunity to prove themselves and earn promotions that may not have been available through more routine assignments.

11. See McGarrell and Chermak, 2003, pp. 188-199.