



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

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The Detroit Handgun Intervention Program: A Court-Based Program for Youthful Handgun Offenders

Summary of a Presentation by Jeffrey Roth, The Urban Institute

Concern about the proliferation of handguns among young black men led Judge Willie G. Lipscomb, Jr., of Detroit to launch a program designed to change attitudes and behavior in the hope of preventing gun violence. In the Handgun Intervention Program (HIP), offenders who had been arrested for carrying concealed weapons were required, as a condition of pretrial release, to attend a class in which they would learn the negative consequences of gun use and be challenged to take personal responsibility for reducing those consequences. Begun in 1993, HIP has had upwards of 6,000 participants, more than 90 percent of whom were African-Americans.

In an NIJ-sponsored study, researchers from The Urban Institute found that, as a result of HIP, attitudes toward gun use improved significantly in the short run. However, many participants questioned whether their behavior would change because they felt the dangers of the street required them to carry a gun.

Program elements

The rationale behind HIP is that attitudinal and behavioral changes might prevent the young men who have been carrying weapons from carrying them or actually using them. Thus, the program is designed to underscore the consequences of weapons use. It attempts to awaken the participants to issues of personal choice, individual responsibility, and the role of nonviolence in African-American history. The 4-hour Saturday classes, which are held in a courtroom, consist of the following components:

- Slide presentation of gun murder victims, designed to make the threat real and personal. The message is that the class participants could also be killed in this way.

- Information packet of facts about handguns and discussion of handguns.
- Peer presentations by older felons. The participants hear, from men not much older than themselves, about the dangers of handgun use, how to avoid violent situations, and similar topics.
- Socratic dialog led by Judge Lipscomb. Three topics in particular are presented as subjects for debate or discussion: the heritage and responsibilities of African-Americans, the responsibility for being a role model for younger men, and the special burdens of gun violence on the African-American community.
- Optional vow of nonviolence. On average, 80 to 90 percent of the group agree to take this vow, which pledges them not to initiate violence.

Measures of change

The evaluation measured changes in seven categories of gun-related attitudes and knowledge:

- Risks vs. benefits of carrying a handgun: Are people in dangerous situations safer if they carry a weapon?
- Alleged inevitability of gun violence: Can gun violence be prevented?
- Ethics of the situation: Is it acceptable, for example, to seek revenge with a gun?
- Status: Does carrying a gun increase a person's status in the community?
- Personal responsibility: Are people accountable for their own life and for violence in their neighborhood?
- Situational avoidance of violence: How can various threatening situations be handled without a gun?
- Knowledge: Do participants know such facts as blacks' high rate of homicide victimization?

Methodology

The sample consisted of 446 people, divided about equally into a test group that attended the class and a control group that did not. The mean age of both groups was 26, and both were the same in employment status and other demographic characteristics. Both groups were reportedly at high risk for violence: 75 percent reported that at some point in their lives they had been shot at; 80 percent said that friends or family members had been killed by guns.

Attitudes were measured twice for the entire sample. The initial measurement was taken in lockup just before arraignment. The second was conducted 12–14 days later just before the second court appearance. The test group was assigned to attend HIP on one of the Saturdays between the two appearances. Researchers were unable to obtain a statistically valid sample for a third measurement 6 months later.

Early effects of the program

The attitudes of the HIP group improved on nearly all measures of each of the seven concepts:

Risks vs. benefits: Between the first and second measurements, the HIP group registered increasingly less belief that possessing a gun put one in control of a threatening situation. An even larger percentage came to feel that carrying a gun was not worth the risk of arrest.

Inevitability of gun violence: The percentage who believed the axiom, “Sometimes you just can’t avoid a gun fight,” decreased between the two measurements.

Ethics: The percentage attending HIP who believed it was acceptable to use a gun in various circumstances declined, and the percentage who believed that nonviolence historically has improved black peoples’ lives increased.

Status: The proportion who believed guns improved one’s standing decreased.

Personal Responsibility: Reactions were mixed, depending on the particular subissue, although for the most part the shift in attitudes was positive.

Situational avoidance: Among HIP attendees, there was a shift toward the beliefs that if you need a gun for some activity, you are better off staying home and that if you need a gun to fit in with your friends, it might be better to make different friends.

Knowledge: For HIP attendees, there were large increases in the percentages who correctly answered three questions about gun homicide risks.

In the short term (first two stages of testing), attitudes toward the negative consequences of gun violence improved significantly. Long-term results were available only for

defendants diverted from adjudication—a small, nonrepresentative subsample. No statistically valid conclusions could be reached about the third stage of testing 6 months after the class.

Attitudinal vs. behavioral change

Preliminary analyses indicate that despite HIP’s positive effects on attitudes, effects on behavior were small at best. This is not surprising in view of the outcome of focus groups held among the participants immediately after the class to obtain feedback about the program. A few participants felt the program was a useless exercise. Others reported that they were very optimistic about the program’s effectiveness, although the researchers felt these individuals may not have fully understood Detroit street life and may have been expressing hopes, not beliefs.

The vast majority of focus group participants, about 80 percent, although skeptical about the program, nevertheless felt they had benefited from it and might think differently as a result. But they did not anticipate changes in behavior, because they felt that carrying a gun was still necessary since the streets were dangerous.

The findings suggest that the Handgun Intervention Program changes attitudes but that it may be difficult to maintain the attitude changes over the long run and convert them into behavioral changes. If fear of the streets expressed by focus group participants is any indication, conditions in the community militate against substantive behavioral change, even if favorable attitudes do not dissipate over the long term. To better understand these conditions and their relationship to attitudes and behavior, the researchers are studying patterns of recidivism (for example, the percentage of people rearrested on gun charges), as well as individual and neighborhood characteristics, to uncover their connections. This phase of the study is nearing completion.

This document is based on Dr. Jeffrey Roth’s presentation to researchers and criminal justice practitioners as part of NIJ’s Research in Progress seminar series. His study was sponsored by NIJ (grant number 95–IJ–CX–0106). Dr. Roth is Director of Crime Control Policy Studies at The Urban Institute. A 60-minute VHS videotape of the seminar, *The Detroit Handgun Intervention Program: A Court-Based Program for Youthful Handgun Offenders*, is available for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other countries). Ask for NCJ 171126. Use the order form on the next page to obtain this videotape and any of the other tapes in the series.

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