



Understanding the Nature of Urban Gun Violence Problems Anthony A. Braga, Ph.D.¹

Summary: Gun violence remains a serious problem in the United States, with some 8,775 gun homicide victims and 337,960 victims of non-fatal violent firearms crimes in 2010. Rates of murder, robbery and aggravated assault are much higher in large cities than elsewhere. While gun violence tends to concentrate in neighborhoods characterized by high-levels of disadvantage, it is not evenly spread among the specific places and residents that make up those neighborhoods. Research documents that urban gun violence problems are highly concentrated among a small number of high-risk people and high-risk places. Gun violence reduction strategies should be targeted on these identifiable risks.

Diagnosing Risky People and Risky Places: Partnerships between criminal justice practitioners and academic researchers can be highly productive in diagnosing the small number of places and people that generate the bulk of urban gun violence problems. Front-line criminal justice practitioners often have deep practical knowledge on the nature of gun violence problems; criminal justice agencies usually maintain official databases that can be mined for relevant trends and patterns. Academic researchers bring theoretical insights and high-powered analytical skills to identify the underlying factors associated with recurring gun violence. Academics can also be helpful in collecting important qualitative and quantitative information from community members, offenders, and victims. Problem analysis research in Boston found:

- Only 5% of street corners and street block faces experienced 74% of all fatal and non-fatal shootings between 1980 and 2008. The most active 60 places experienced more than 1,000 shootings during this time period.
- Some 1% of Boston youth participate in street gangs. Gang-related conflicts generate half of Boston homicides and gang members are involved in two-thirds of non-fatal shootings. Gang members involved in violent events are well known to the criminal justice system and often have long prior records comprised of many different crimes.

Policy Implications: Problem analysis should be used to focus and adapt gun violence prevention strategies. Analysis is a central part of proven and promising gun violence control strategies, such as:

- Pulling levers focused deterrence strategies that concentrate criminal justice, social service, and community-based action on gangs and other high-rate offenders.
- Hot spots policing strategies that seek to change the underlying conditions that cause particular places experience high-levels of gun violence.
- Prisoner reentry programs focused on high-risk individuals who are likely to be victims of shootings or commit shootings when released from prison or jail.
- Gun market disruption strategies, rooted in analyses of ATF firearms trace data, to identify the sources of guns to these high-rate offenders. Prioritizing investigations via analyses of ballistic matches of bullets and cartridge casings generated by repeated criminal gun use and gun movements in criminal networks.

¹ Professor, School of Criminal Justice, Rutgers University; Senior Research Fellow, Harvard Kennedy School