



Assessing Police Efforts to Reduce Gun Crime: Results from a National Survey

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Debates over strategies to reduce gun violence are not well informed by systematic information on what police are doing to address gun crime and the effectiveness of those efforts. In 2009, the Police Executive Research Forum examined these issues through a national survey conducted with police agencies serving cities of 100,000 or more people. The survey examined enforcement of selected gun laws as well as the use and perceived effectiveness of many enforcement and prevention strategies to reduce gun violence.

Highly rated strategies

Strategies that police use most frequently and rate as most effective include targeted efforts focused on high-risk places and groups (such as gun detection in hot spots and targeting of violent gangs), as well as multi-agency, comprehensive, problem-solving efforts. These practices are consistent with research evidence and expert opinion on effective strategies to reduce gun violence and should be given strong consideration in policy and funding decisions.

Gaps in prevention and enforcement efforts

Police efforts to reduce gun crime can also be enhanced considerably. Many evidence-based and promising strategies for reducing gun violence, including directed patrols in gun crime hot spots, enhanced monitoring of probationers and parolees, and use of shooting response protocols, are not used regularly by most urban police agencies. Efforts in a number of areas, such as disruption of illegal gun markets, appear to be underdeveloped. Similarly, there are gaps in the enforcement of many gun laws. Agencies in jurisdictions with gun registration, regulation of private sales, theft / loss reporting requirements, and regulation of licensed gun dealers engage in limited efforts to enforce or use these laws due to resource constraints or other factors. Further assessment of these efforts and the factors that facilitate or hinder them is needed, as analyses across cities suggest that gun violence is lower in cities where police engage in more intensive gun enforcement and gun violence prevention efforts.

The importance of federal assistance

Local police agencies depend heavily on cooperation with federal authorities in their efforts to reduce gun crime. Submitting cases to the U.S. Attorney for prosecution was the leading strategy identified by local police for addressing gun crime. This reflects the desire of police to obtain more severe penalties for many gun crimes than are available or typically administered at the state level. Local police also emphasize cooperation with federal authorities in multi-agency programs like Project Safe Neighborhoods and Weed and Seed, and they rely heavily on collaboration with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) for traces of the sales histories of crime guns (gun tracing), gun trafficking investigations, and targeted enforcement efforts. Accordingly, federal policymakers should continue to support and strengthen these cooperative efforts.

In sum, police strategies to reduce gun crime could be intensified and strengthened in various ways that could further enhance the effectiveness of police in suppressing gun crime. However, the success of these efforts will also be tied to the resources and emphasis given to gun crime by other local, state, and federal officials.