



POLICE STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING GUN VIOLENCE

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Strategies to reduce gun violence include a wide range of efforts to interrupt the illegal supply of guns, deter gun possession, reduce gun carrying in public places, toughen responses to illegal gun use, reduce demand for firearms, promote responsible ownership of guns, and address community conditions that foster gun crime. Law enforcement agencies are central to these efforts. In addition to investigating violent gun crimes after the fact, police can also use a variety of proactive strategies to reduce gun crime. In general, little is known about the use or effectiveness of many such efforts. However, growing evidence suggests that efforts targeted on high risk places, behaviors, and actors are effective, particularly when conducted in the context of multi-agency problem-solving efforts. Partnerships with federal agencies have also become increasingly important to state and local efforts to reduce gun crime.

Targeting Gun Carrying in Hot Spots

One successful approach to reducing gun violence is to suppress illegal gun carrying in “hot spots” where gun crime is concentrated. In its most basic form, this strategy involves putting additional patrol resources in hot spots and having officers focus on gun detection through traffic stops and pedestrian checks. Studies conducted in cities inside and outside the United States indicate that targeted crackdowns on illegal gun carrying reduce gun crime substantially and improve citizens’ perceptions in targeted areas. Police can also enhance community support for such efforts by consulting area residents in advance of such initiatives.

Targeting Violent Groups and ‘Pulling Levers’

Efforts targeted on high-risk groups such as gangs, probationers, parolees, and known chronic offenders are also an important evidence-based approach to reducing gun crime. A highly popularized initiative to reduce gang and youth violence was Boston’s Operation Ceasefire, implemented in 1996. This project involved a collaborative, problem-solving effort among police, prosecutors, probation and parole officers, federal officials, researchers, and other government and community groups. Working group members focused their attention on chronic youth offenders linked to violent gangs, warning them through direct meetings and indirect channels (e.g., gang outreach workers and flyers) that continued violence would be met with severe sanctions including targeted crackdowns and referrals for federal prosecution. When necessary, Ceasefire working group members followed through on these threats, which resulted in a number of high-profile arrests, convictions, and harsh sentences. The project also made various social services available to gang members to help them avoid violence. This approach, which has come to be known as the “pulling levers” or “focused deterrence” strategy, was highly successful in Boston and has become a blueprint for other successful local and national initiatives, including the federal government’s Project Safe Neighborhoods program.

What We Still Need to Know

While crackdowns on illegal gun carrying and the pulling levers strategy are leading examples of evidence-based approaches to reducing gun crime, there has been little research on other police strategies to reduce gun crime. Most notably, little is known about police efforts to address the illegal firearms market through proactive investigation of illegal gun sales and illegal gun possession. This constitutes an important “missing link” in the debate over gun control, as little is known about the implementation or enforcement of many gun laws. To address these and other issues, the Police Executive Research Forum, a policing membership and research organization, is conducting a national study of what police are doing to reduce gun crime, what works, and what facilitates or hinders these efforts.