

Case Study: The Boston Gun Project and Operation Ceasefire

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The Boston Gun Project was a problem-oriented policing initiative expressly aimed at reducing homicide victimization among youths in Boston in the mid 1990s (Kennedy et al., 1996; Kennedy et al., 2001). It represented an innovative partnership between researchers and practitioners to assess the city's youth homicide problem and implement an intervention designed to have a substantial near-term impact on the problem.

Project research showed that the problem of youth homicide was concentrated among a small number of chronically offending ganginvolved youth. Project research also showed that firearms associated with youth, especially with gang youth, tended to be semiautomatic pistols, often ones that were quite new and apparently recently diverted from retail. Many of these guns were first sold at retail in Massachusetts as well as

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being smuggled into Boston from out of state. The Project began in early 1995 and implemented what is now known as the "Operation Ceasefire" intervention beginning on May 15, 1996. The Ceasefire intervention had two main elements: (1) the "pulling levers" focused deterrence strategy to prevent gang violence, and (2) a direct law enforcement attack on illicit firearms traffickers supplying youth with guns.

The Boston Police Department and Harvard University researchers initiated the Boston Gun Project work by approaching key criminal justice and social service stakeholders in Boston to support a research and development

process by designating one key line-level person to participate in a working group. These stakeholders initially included Massachusetts Probation, Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (juvenile corrections), Suffolk County District Attorney's Office, U.S. Attorney's Office, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), and Boston Community Centers. In the working group setting, practitioners discussed their views on the nature of youth gun violence in Boston and Harvard researchers used available information resources to closely examine these insights to create a detailed description of the gun violence problem.









With the benefit of a clear description of the problem, the interagency working group developed a new approach to preventing youth violence known as Operation Ceasefire. The violence prevention plans were presented to the executives of the key agencies involved in the initiative. The executives approved the violence prevention plans and pledged to support the implementation of the new approach.

Deterring Gang Violence

The Boston Police Department's Youth Violence Strike Force (YVSF), an elite unit of some 40 officers and detectives, coordinated the actions of Operation Ceasefire. An interagency working group, comprised of law enforcement personnel, youth workers, and members of Boston's Ten Point Coalition of activist black clergy, was convened on a biweekly basis to address outbreaks of serious gang violence.

Operation Ceasefire's "pulling levers" strategy was designed to deter gang violence by reaching out directly to gangs, saying explicitly that violence would no longer be tolerated, and backing up that message by "pulling every lever" legally available when violence occurred (Kennedy, 1997). These law enforcement levers included disrupting street-level drug markets,

serving warrants, mounting federal prosecutions, and changing the conditions of community supervision for probationers and parolees in the targeted group.

Simultaneously, youth workers, probation and parole officers, and clergy offered gang members services and other kinds of help. If gang members wanted to step away from a violent lifestyle, the Ceasefire working group focused on providing them with the services and opportunities necessary to make the transition.

The Ceasefire Working Group delivered their anti-violence message in formal meetings with gang members; through individual police and probation contacts with gang members; through meetings with inmates of secure juvenile facilities in the city; and through gang outreach workers. The deterrence message was not a deal with gang members to stop violence. Rather, it was a promise to gang members that violent behavior would evoke an immediate and intense response. If gangs committed other crimes but refrained from violence, the normal workings of police, prosecutors, and the rest of the criminal justice system dealt with these matters. But if gang members hurt people, the Working Group focused its enforcement actions on them.

A large reduction in the yearly number of Boston youth homicides followed immediately after Operation Ceasefire was implemented in mid-1996. A U.S. National Institute of Justice (NIJ) sponsored evaluation found that the Ceasefire intervention was associated with a 63% reduction in Boston youth homicide and similar large reductions in non-fatal serious gun violence (Braga et al., 2001). This reduction was sustained for the next five years (see Figure 1). The Ceasefire program, as designed, was in place until 2000.

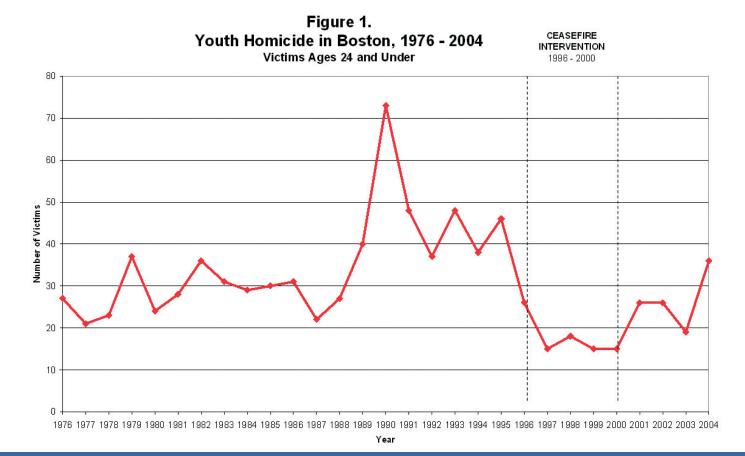
During the early years of new millennium, the Boston Police experimented with a broader approach to violence prevention by expanding certain Ceasefire tactics to a broader range of problems such as serious repeat violent gun offenders, the re-entry of incarcerated violent offenders back into

high-risk Boston neighborhoods, and criminogenic families in hot spot areas. These new approaches, known broadly as Boston Strategy II, seemed to diffuse the ability of Boston to respond to ongoing conflicts among gangs. Youth homicide, most of which is gang related, has returned as a serious problem for the City of Boston. In Fall 2004, the Boston Police implemented a new violence prevention campaign, which borrows heavily from Ceasefire's tight focus on disrupting cycles of violent gang retribution (For additional discussion of the implementation of Ceasefire, see Kennedy, Braga, and Piehl, 2001; Braga and Winship, 2005).

Disrupting Illegal Gun Markets

The interagency Boston Gun Project working group also developed a gun market disruption strategy to address the patterns of illegal diversion identified by the research. The resulting strategy was appropriately focused on the illegal diversion of new handguns from retail outlets in Massachusetts and elsewhere. For investigative and tactical purposes, guns with quick timeto-crime offer law enforcement an opportunity to identify illegal gun traffickers. New guns have passed through fewer hands and this makes it much easier for law enforcement to investigate its diversion and its diverters, and to mount prosecutions.

Records are likely to be more complete and more available; individuals listed on paperwork are easier to find; guns are less likely to have been resold, given away, or stolen; and the chain of transfers to illicit consumers is likely to be shorter (Kennedy et al. 1996). While youth handguns were given investigative priority,



the gun trafficking initiative was intended to reduce the general availability of new handguns to all gun-using criminals in Boston, regardless of possessor age. The key elements of the Ceasefire gun market disruption strategy were (summarized from Kennedy et al., 2001):

- Expanded focus of local, state, and federal authorities to include intrastate firearms trafficking in Massachusetts in addition to interstate trafficking.
- Focused enforcement attention on traffickers of the makes and calibers of handguns most used by gang members.
- Focused enforcement attention on traffickers of handguns that had short time-to-crime intervals and, thus, were most likely to have been trafficked. The ATF Boston Field Division implemented an inhouse tracking system that flagged handguns whose traces revealed a short time-to-crime interval.
- Focused enforcement attention on traffickers of handguns used by the city's most violent gangs.
- Attempted to restore obliterated serial numbers of confiscated handguns and subsequently investigate trafficking based on these restorations.
- Supported these enforcement priorities through strategic analyses of data generated by the Boston Police Department and ATF's comprehensive tracing of crime guns and by developing leads from the systematic debriefing of gang-affiliated arrestees and

those involved in violent crime.

- Deliberate communication of successful investigations and prosecutions of gun traffickers to deter others from diverting firearms from retail sources to criminals and youth in Boston.

A U.S. National Institute of Justice sponsored evaluation found that the Ceasefire intervention was associated with a 23% reduction in the monthly percentage of recovered crime handguns that were new. Ceasefire had a significant impact on the supply of new handguns to criminals in Boston (Braga and Pierce, 2005).

The Role of Ballistics Imaging Technology

In March 1995, Boston was one of the first major cities to receive IBIS ballistics imaging technology from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF). The system was considered fully implemented when the Boston Police Department Ballistics Unit made its first IBIS match in July 1995 (Braga and Pierce, 2004). Since adopting the technology, the BPD test fires all recovered crime guns and the expended bullets and cartridge casings are imaged and entered into the IBIS database (Braga and Pierce, 2004).

Confirmed IBIS matches are a key part of the BPD's evolving gun violence reduction strategies (from Operation Ceasefire to the newly implemented Street Violence Suppression Project). Every two weeks, the Boston Police convene an interagency working group comprised of BPD officers and detectives, ATF agents, Assistant

U.S. Attorneys, Assistant Suffolk County District Attorneys, Massachusetts State Police, Massachusetts Probation officers, Department of Youth Services (juvenile corrections) case workers, and other criminal justice practitioners as needed. This meeting serves as a scanning and analysis forum for ongoing conflicts among violent gangs and other gun incidents with high potential for retaliation.

After specific violence problems are identified, BPD officers and detectives are assigned responsibility for devising and implementing appropriate violence prevention plans to halt outbreaks of violence. Strategies are developed at a separate response development meeting; however, implemented plans and progress updates are presented at the bi-weekly meetings to disseminate knowledge on what works (and what doesn't) and to hold officers responsible for keeping targeted groups and individuals from shooting at each other. At the routine scanning and analysis meetings, BPD crime analysts and intelligence officers present information on gun incidents over the previous two weeks. Recent IBIS matches are highlighted at the beginning of each meeting.

Members of the working group discuss the circumstances associated with the linked incidents; information developed through interviews with arrested offenders, victims, and witnesses; available intelligence on current "beefs" between gangs or the activities of serious violent offenders in the linked areas, and analyses of other physical evidence collected at the

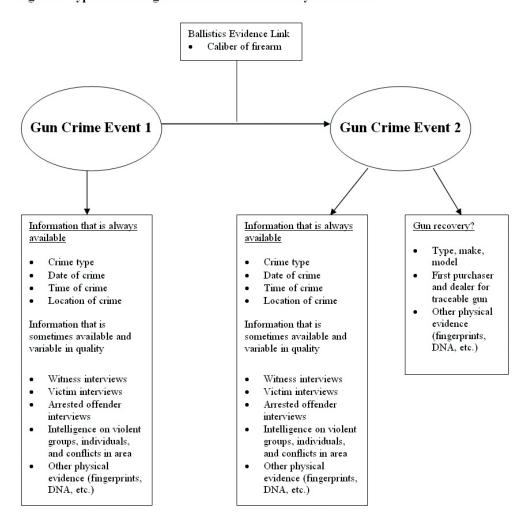
crime scenes, such as DNA and fingerprints. If guns are recovered and successfully traced by ATF, information on the first retail purchaser and licensed dealer are presented. In essence, an "information chain" is constructed around the events linked by ballistics evidence. The amount and types of information associated with linked gun crime events can vary tremendously across matches (see Figure 2).

A recent evaluation suggests that the IBIS technology significantly increased the productivity of the BPD Ballistics Unit in linking guns crimes (Braga and Pierce, 2004). The analysis found that the adoption of the IBIS technology was associated with a more than 6-fold increase in the number of cold hit matches per month. Clearly, the IBIS technology significantly increases the ability of law enforcement agencies to make ballistics matches across crime scenes.

The cost effectiveness estimates and qualitative evidence also suggests that the IBIS technology allows law enforcement agencies to make hits that would have otherwise not been possible. Before IBIS was adopted by the BPD, ballistics matching across gun crime scenes was an ad-hoc and tedious process. Now, the BPD can systematically compare recovered gun crime evidence to its entire inventory of evidence with

little effort. The research also found that serious violent offenders who were well known to the criminal justice system were involved in crimes linked through IBIS matches. IBIS matches were also associated with high conviction rates for these offenders.

Figure 2. Types of Investigative Information Linked by IBIS Match



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