

Project Safe Neighborhoods in Chicago

R E V I E W O F R E S E A R C H

January 2009

Homicide and Gun Violence in Chicago: Evaluation and Summary of the Project Safe Neighborhoods Program

*A Summary of Research by Tracey Meares (Yale), Andrew V. Papachristos (UMass, Amherst),
and Jeffrey Fagan (Columbia)*

Rates of violent crime in Chicago are at a near 30-year low, yet the city continues to grapple with a murder and violent crime problem. In 2002 and again in 2008, Chicago had more murders than any other city in the U.S., including the much larger Los Angeles and New York. Today, as in the past, Chicago's murder and gun violence problem results from a deadly nexus of illegal guns and gang violence. In the last five years, Chicago has averaged 512 murders per year. About 80 percent of these murders are committed with an illegal firearm, and nearly half of are somehow connected to gang-related disputes and activities.

Since 2002, a Department of Justice funded program called Project Safe Neighborhoods ("PSN") has been implemented in Chicago with the specific charge of reducing the city's high levels of homicide and gun violence. Chicago's PSN began in May 2002 under the direction of the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, Patrick Fitzgerald. The U.S. Attorney's office brought local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies together with community based organizations and researchers from the University of Chicago with the specific purpose of analyzing Chicago's gun violence problem and devising context-specific gun violence reduction strategies.

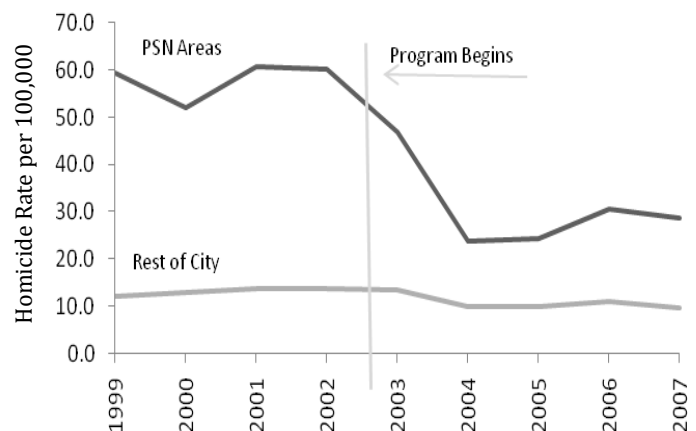
CHICAGO'S HOMICIDE PROBLEM

PSN is a "research driven" program—scientific analysis of data is intended to guide: (a) the analysis of the specific crime problem, (b) the selection of the intervention targets, (c) the design of strategic interventions, and (d) the overall short-term and long-term program evaluation.

Data analysis immediately revealed that a very small number of neighborhoods in Chicago are responsible for most of the city's violence trends. The "city's" crime problem is in fact geographically and socially concentrated in a few highly impoverished and socially isolated neighborhoods. Data also revealed that most victims (and offenders) of gun violence in Chicago tend to be young African American men who live in neighborhoods on the West or South sides of the city.

Keeping this in mind, the PSN team selected two police districts (or approximately 24 "neighborhoods") on the Chicago's West Side where rates of murder and gun violence were more than four times higher than the city

Figure 1. Homicide Rates in Chicago, 1999 to 2007



average in 2002. The murder rate on Chicago's West Side at that time was approximately 75 per 100,000, compared to the overall city average of approximately 22 per 100,000 (New York's murder rate that same year was 7 per 100,000.) Without the PSN areas, the average homicide rate in the rest of the city drop to approximately 17 per 100,000. Additionally, Chicago's West Side is home to one of Chicago's oldest gang "Nations," the Vice Lords, an organization responsible for most of the area's gang-related violence.

Data analysis also demonstrated that the victims *and* offenders of gun violence in Chicago consist of a small group of individuals who have had repeated contacts with law enforcement. More than 60 percent of homicide victims and 80 percent of homicide offenders in the PSN target areas had at least one prior arrest. Furthermore, offenders involved in gun and violent crimes in the area have been incarcerated an average of three times in their adult life. This suggests that the population most at risk of committing a murder *and* of becoming a murder victim is highly concentrated among a small population of "active" offenders. In the PSN area, this population of active offenders consists of about 1,500 individuals, or less than one percent of the area's total population.

STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS

The PSN team reasoned that the best way to address Chicago's homicide and gun violence problem was to craft intervention strategies focused on the population with a very high risk of being a victim or offender of gun violence in the targeted neighborhoods. Two principles guided the design and development of PSN interventions: (1) that enforcement efforts be highly specified and targeted to those most at risk of being a victim and offender of gun violence, and (2) that serious efforts should be directed towards changing the normative side of gun violence, i.e., the reasons young men use guns and their attitudes towards the law and law enforcers. Following these principles the PSN team devised several law enforcement, community outreach, and offender notification forums and follow-up re-entry programs.

Law Enforcement Strategies. The PSN team devised a targeted deterrence law enforcement approach. Rather than increasing punishment and enforcement efforts uniformly across the city, the PSN team concentrated its efforts on those high-risk offenders residing in the target areas. The basic premise is that increased enforcement efforts against gun violence are likely to have the desired deterrent effect only when directed at the population most likely to be engaged in the behavior.

The PSN team created several targeted enforcement strategies, the most important of which are: (1) increased federal prosecutions of gun cases; (2) bi-weekly review of all gun-related cases in the city by a joint team of federal and local law enforcement officials; and (3) the creation of unique law enforcement "gun teams." All three of these efforts were intended to bring heightened resources and attention to gun offenders in the targeted neighborhoods and ensure constant cross-agency communication in all gun-related cases. In particular, the "gun teams" were a new creation the sole purpose of which was to give top priority to following the flow of illegal guns in the city: in at least two high-profile cases, this meant following the trail of guns into two other source states, Indiana and Mississippi.

Community Outreach Efforts. The PSN team implemented several community and school-based prevention programs. In particular, the PSN team worked with local non-profit organizations to implement two programs that brought gun violence education and prevention curricula to grammar and high schools in the targeted areas. These programs, called "Hands without Guns" and "In My Shoes," were used to inform school aged youth about the perils and consequences of gun violence. Hands Without Guns provided youth outreach workers who spoke candidly with students about the types of interactions leading to gun violence and ways to avoid or mitigate such situations. In My Shoes organized dialogue sessions between students and victims of gun violence (many in wheelchairs), who spoke about how guns had changed their lives. The PSN program also provided modest seed grants to several other community organizations in the target areas working on gun violence issues.

Offender Notification Forums and Follow-Up Re-entry Programs. The PSN team’s law enforcement strategies are, for the most part, traditional in nature in that they emphasize direct policing and prosecution of gun-related offenses. However, the PSN team also believed that the key to changing patterns of gun crime lies in altering the normative beliefs of gun users themselves. Prior research, including research in Chicago, suggested that individuals are most likely to comply with the law (a) when they believe in the substance of the law, (b) when they have positive interactions with law enforcement agents, and (c) when they perceive the procedures used in enforcing the law to be fair and just.

Keeping these principles in mind and considering other successful programs implemented in Boston, the PSN team crafted its most innovative strategy, *Offender Notification Forums* (“Forums”). Offenders in the target neighborhood with a history of gun violence and gang participation who were recently assigned to parole or probation are requested to attend a forum hosted by the PSN team. The forums are hour-long, round-table style meetings in which approximately 20 offenders sit with representatives from state and local law enforcement officials, community representatives, and various service providers. Informal conversations with attendees after the conclusion of meeting often last an additional hour and lead to more intimate follow-up and service provision. The meetings take place in a location of civic importance (such as a local park, library, or school) and are designed to be egalitarian in nature, meaning that offenders sit at the same table as all other Forum participants rather than as passive audience members.

The content of the meeting is designed to stress to offenders the *consequences* should they choose to pick up a gun, as well as, the *choices* they have to make to ensure that they do not re-offend. The meeting is divided into three different segments. First, law enforcement agencies openly discuss the targeted PSN enforcement efforts, giving examples of cases that have occurred *within* the offenders’ neighborhoods. Many times, the Forum attendees were familiar with the defendants. The point of the first segment is to explain in very specific terms the consequences of gun offending for both the individual and his neighborhood. The second segment of the Forum entails a presentation by an ex-offender who has successfully stayed away from a life of offending for several years. The ex-offender talks about how he has been able to stay away from a life of crime using poignant examples from his own experiences. The speaker’s message stresses the seriousness of the current levels of violence in the community, the problems of intra-racial violence, the truth about gang life (including its meager financial rewards to most of its gang members), the troubles offenders face when looking for work, and the seriousness of the PSN enforcement efforts. The final segment of the forum stresses the choices offenders can make in order to avoid re-offending. This entails a series of conversations with service providers, community agencies, and employers from the offenders’ own neighborhoods. Programs include substance abuse assistance, temporary shelter, job training, mentorship and union training, education and GED courses, and behavior counseling. Often several local employers attend and actually instruct attendees on the necessary steps to gain employment with their respective firms.

EVALUATION RESULTS AND SUMMARY

Researchers used a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the impact of PSN strategies on neighborhood level crime rates and individual rates of re-offending. While the full evaluation results are available elsewhere, major findings are summarized below.

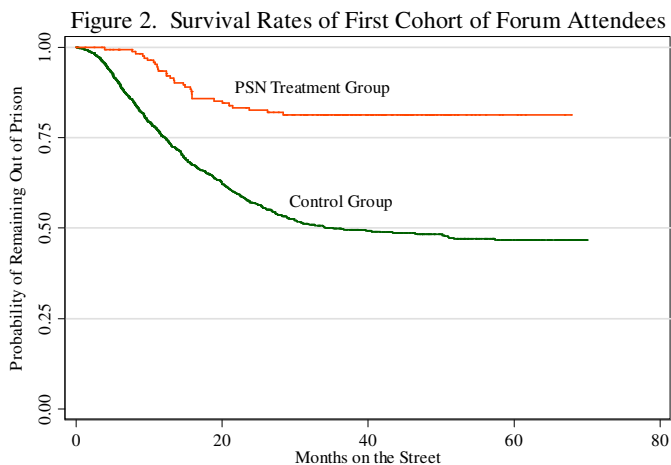
Reducing Neighborhood Crime Rates. At the neighborhood level, PSN appears to have been remarkably effective in reducing neighborhood crime rates. As seen in FIGURE 1, there were dramatic reductions in homicide in the PSN districts as compared to control areas and the city as a whole. More specifically, there was an approximately **37 percent decrease** in monthly homicide rate after the start of the program as compared to the preceding three years. Furthermore, as can also be seen in FIGURE 1, this decrease is significantly larger than the rest of the city

as a whole—in fact, if one considers the PSN areas separately from the city, nearly all of the decline in the city’s homicide can be associated with the drop in the PSN areas.

Neighborhood level analysis also demonstrates the relative impact of the various PSN enforcement and community efforts. Increased federal prosecutions and the number of guns recovered by the gun teams were correlated with declining neighborhood level homicide rates—namely, more federal prosecutions and getting more guns off of the street are associated with a small portion of the observed drop in homicides in the PSN neighborhoods.

The PSN program with the greatest effect on declining neighborhood level homicide was the Offender Notification Forums. In short, the greater the proportion of offenders who attend the Forums, the greater the decline in neighborhood levels of homicide. The reason for this large effect is explored in individual levels of re-offending and their opinions of law enforcement.

Individual Levels of Recidivism and Attitudes towards the Law. Analyses of recidivism rates give further support of the efficacy of the PSN Forums. To summarize, individuals who attended a PSN Forum were almost **30 percent less likely** to return to prison as compared to similar individuals in the same neighborhood who did not attend a forum. As seen in FIGURE 2, those individuals in the PSN treatment group tend to “survive” on the street longer periods of time as compared to individuals in the control group. By the third year after release from prison, approximately half of all non-PSN group members have re-offended and been incarcerated, as compared to about 25 percent of the PSN treatment group. Furthermore, the program appears to diminish levels of recidivism and reincarceration among gang *and* non-gang members, and appears to be particularly effective for first-time offenders, those individuals who have been convicted of only a single prior offense.



Researchers also conducted a survey of 150 offenders who attended the Forums in order to assess their opinions of the law, the various PSN enforcement efforts, and other neighborhood and crime factors. Survey results suggest that offenders are more likely to comply with the law and less likely to carry a gun when they have more positive opinions of the law and, in particular, the police.

FURTHER READING

The full evaluation results can be found in the following papers:

- Papachristos, Andrew V. , Tracey Meares, and Jeffrey Fagan (2007). “Attention Felons: Evaluating Project Safe Neighborhoods in Chicago,” *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies*.
- Meares, Tracey and Andrew V. Papachristos (2008). “Policing Gun Crime without Guns.” Available at the Social Science Research Network: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1326932>

- Papachristos, Andrew V., Tracey Meares, and Jeffrey Fagan. (2009). "Why Do Criminals Obey the Law? The Influence of the Law and Social Networks on Active Gun Offenders." Available at the Social Science Research Network: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1326631>
- Fagan, Jeffrey, Andrew V. Papachristos, Danielle Wallace, and Tracey Meares. (2008). "Desistance and Legitimacy: Effect Heterogeneity in a Field Experiment with High-Risk Offenders." Available at Columbia Law School: http://www2.law.columbia.edu/fagan/papers/Desistance_and_Legitimacy_PSN_Recidivism_2.ppt