

OPERATION CEASE FIRE

Boston Police Department

Winner - 1999 Webber Seavey Award
International Association of Chiefs of Police

Winner - 1998 Herman Goldstein Award
for Excellence in Problem-Oriented Policing

Winner - 1997 State and Local Government Award,
Innovations in American Government
A partnership among the Ford Foundation, John F. Kennedy School
of Government at Harvard University, and the Council for
Excellence in Government

Operation Cease Fire

Boston Police Department

David Kennedy, Author

Note: Referenced Figures 1-10 are not attached to this document.

A. SCANNING

In Boston, youth homicide (ages 24 and under) increased 230% - from 22 victims in 1987 to 73 victims in 1990 (see Figure 1). Youth homicide remained high even after the peak of the epidemic; Boston averaged 43 youth homicides per year between 1991 and 1995. Boston seemed well and truly out of control. The police were simply overwhelmed. "We were responding to six, seven shootings every night," says Lt. Gary French, now the commander of the Boston Police Department's (BPD) Youth Violence Strike Force. "You just ran from crime scene to crime scene." And while 1990 marked the peak, the problems persisted. "I think there was a real question in people's minds about whether Boston would remain a viable city," says BPD commissioner Paul Evans.

For many of Boston's young people, the city had become a dangerous, complicated place. In a 1993 Centers for Disease Control survey, some 15% of the junior high school student sample said that they had avoided school in the last month because they were scared: the highest such response rate in the ten cities surveyed.¹ Youth interviewed in Boston portrayed themselves as choosing between living an ordinary life - including having friends and going out at night - with attendant risks of gun violence, or isolating themselves from friends and community to avoid those risks. A young probationer interviewed in 1995 said that he did his best to avoid his peers in an effort to prevent being dragged into dangerous conflicts. "I stay home, or go over to my cousin's," he said. "It's too dangerous to go out, or have a lot of friends." Another young probationer, more active on the streets, said that navigating their dangers required constant, demanding attention. "It's like a video game," he said. "You master one level, and they bump you up a level, and things get harder, and you keep on going until you just can't do it any more. That's what the streets have gotten to be like."

The Gun Project's Working Group was explicitly designed to draw on the knowledge and ideas of front-line practitioners and to incorporate their views into the framing of Project research and any subsequent operations. From the beginning of the Working Group, police, probation officers, and streetworkers, described a world in which a relatively small number of very scary kids profoundly affected the nature of community life and the behavior of other kids. Indeed, police gang officers and probation officers said flatly at the outset of the project that they knew essentially all those youth who had killed, or were killed, by gun violence. Probation officers said that it was rare to lose a kid to gun violence who had not previously been on probation,

¹ Laura Kann et al. 1995. "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance -- United States, 1993." In *CDC Surveillance Summaries*, March 24, 1995. MMWR 1995; 44 (No SS-1): 1-56.

and the dark joke among gang officers was whether it would be ethical to take out life insurance on certain kids. Their experience was that youth tended to cite self-defense to explain their gun acquisition; Boston police gang officers spoke of the recent phenomena of young men "with a gun in one pocket and a scholarship in the other."

The line-level personnel in the working group had a very particular view of what was going on in the city. Some of their convictions can be captured more or less as follows: the gun violence problem was a gang problem, at least insofar as the worst offenders driving a larger cycle of fear, gun acquisition, and gun use were gang members; most victims and offenders were gang members, known to authorities, and had been formally court-involved, sometimes but not usually on gun charges; most violence was not about drugs and drug-market issues or about turf but was more "personal"; acts of violence involving members of different gangs often sparked vendetta-like "beefs" that were assumed by both (or several) gangs and that could continue for years independent of the original incident; most of the youth involved were not "bad" or inherently dangerous, and many were participating because gang membership had become a means of self-protection (albeit with its own serious risks); only a tenth or so of gang members were consistently dangerous and frightening, and they set the tone of street life both for the other members of their gangs and, to a lesser but significant extent, for the community as a whole. It's worth noting that these were views quite contrary to those usually expressed in Boston about the youth violence problem, which tended to focus on such larger issues as troubled neighborhoods, the influence of television violence and other cultural issues, and drug trafficking.

Agencies in Boston had responded to the youth violence problem by pursuing a high-arrest strategy aimed at gang members, combined with prevention and diversion programs aimed at drawing youth away from gangs and providing them with alternatives. Probation officers had launched an innovative street probation program aimed at high-risk youth, called "Night Light," in which probation officers and BPD gang unit officers performed house checks at night. The streetworker program focused on providing high-risk youth with services and mediating disputes. A high degree of cooperation had evolved at the line level among Boston agencies involved in youth violence. Nonetheless, Working Group participants felt strongly that their efforts were not dealing with the problem effectively.

B. ANALYSIS

The Harvard team, which took primary responsibility for Project research and analysis, framed these issues in gun market terms. Gun trafficking and other routes in the illicit acquisition of firearms represented the supply side. Fear and/or other factors that might be driving illicit gun acquisition and use represented the demand side. The researchers employed a variety of research techniques. Youth homicides were mapped geographically, gun markets were analyzed using BPD/BATF gun recovery and tracing data; the criminal histories of youth homicide victims and offenders were collected and analyzed; and hospital emergency room data collected to shed light on non-fatal injuries. In addition to these techniques using formal agency data, innovative qualitative techniques were used in

which front-line practitioners systematically contributed their knowledge about such matters as the number and size of gangs in the city, their turf and antagonism/alliance relationships, and the contribution of gangs and gang conflict to the city's youth homicide problem. These qualitative exercises, which collected information unavailable from formal agency sources, turned out to be among the most valuable inputs into the problem solving process.

Key findings included the following:

- Most youth (age 21 and under) gun and knife homicides occur in the three neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan (see Figure 2). Most gun and knife woundings also occur in these neighborhoods. Of 155 gun and knife homicides that occurred in the city over 1990-1994, 88% of victims were male; 12% female; 78% were black; 16% white; 2.6% were Asian; and 2.6% of other races. Firearms accounted for 84% of the victimizations, knives for 16%.
- Of the 1,550 firearms recovered by BPD from those age 21 and under between January 1991 and May 1995, 52.1% were semiautomatic pistols, 30.0% were revolvers, 8.5% were rifles, and 9.4% were shotguns.
- While the assumption in the city had been that, due to tight Massachusetts gun laws, any gun trafficking to youth was through trafficking from southern state, trace analysis showed that 34.0% of traceable firearms recovered from those age 21 and under by the Boston Police Department were first sold at retail in Massachusetts. No other state reached double digits on a percentage basis; the next highest source state was Georgia, with 8.0%. All southern states combined -- Georgia, Florida, Virginia, Alabama, North Carolina, Mississippi, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Maryland -- added up to 31.5%.
- While the assumption had also been that guns were being stolen by youth, of all traceable guns recovered from those age 21 and under, 26% were less than two years old when recovered by police, and thus almost certainly trafficked rather than stolen. Of semiautomatic pistols, 41% were less than two years old. Of all traceable guns less than two years old, 84% were semiautomatic pistols.
- Nearly 20% of all guns recovered from those age 21 and under have obliterated serial numbers, suggesting that these guns were relatively new "trafficked" guns rather than guns that had been, for instance, stolen from houses or cars.
- Guns recovered from those age 30 and older were less likely to be semiautomatic pistols; less likely to have obliterated serial numbers; more likely to have been first sold at retail in Massachusetts; and more likely to be older.
- Of the 155 youth gun and knife homicide victims, prior to their murders 75% had been arraigned for at least one offense in Massachusetts courts; 19% had been committed to DYS; 42% had been on probation; and 14% were on probation at the time of their murder.

- Of the 125 cleared youth offenders associated with those homicides, 77% had been arraigned for at least one offense in Massachusetts courts; 26% had been committed to DYS; 54% had been on probation; and 26% were on probation at the time they committed their homicide.
- Of the 117 homicide victims with at least one arraignment, the average number of arraignments is 9.5, and 44% had ten or more arraignments. Of the 96 offenders with at least one arraignment, the average number of arraignments is 9.7, and 41% had ten or more arraignments. For both victims and offenders, arraignments for property offenses, armed violent offenses, and disorder offenses outnumber drug offenses. For offenders, unarmed violent offenses also outnumber drug offenses.
- Boston had roughly 61 gangs, with 1,300 members, in the high-risk neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, plus surrounding areas (see Figure 3). This represented less than 3% of the youth ages 14 - 24 in these neighborhoods. These gangs were responsible for at least 60% of Boston's youth homicides. The primary driver of youth violence was a network of standing antagonisms among gangs, which were identified and mapped through work with front-line practitioners familiar with these "beefs" (see Figure 4).
- Gang members were at extremely high risk for violent victimization. Statistically, if one assumes an average nine-year gang membership (over, for example, age 16-24), gang members had a 1/7 chance of dying by gunshot and an even higher chance of being wounded by gunshot. It was thus reasonable, and supported by interviews with youth in Boston, that fear and the desire for self-defense were fueling both gun acquisition and gang formation in the city. It was also reasonable to think that reducing the risk of violence would have a large impact on gun acquisition and other high-risk behavior.

C. RESPONSE

The Working Group framed two main responses to these findings; together, they make up what is now called the "Ceasefire" strategy. One was to mount a direct law enforcement attack, driven primarily by the BPD and BATF, on illicit gun trafficking. One avenue was to utilize trace information, matched with BPD information, to identify those trafficking guns (particularly to actively violent gangs) and investigate and prosecute them (see Figure 5 for a real, but partially disguised, set of trace and other information providing a lead to an actual trafficking ring). Another avenue was to systematically debrief gang offenders facing serious charges for violent, drug, and other crimes regarding who might be selling guns in their neighborhoods. Follow-up on these strategies by the BPD, BATF, and prosecutors resulted in a substantial increase in trafficking cases.

The second main response, and probably the most important part of Ceasefire, was a unique approach to creating a very powerful deterrent to violent offending by gangs and gang members. The "pulling levers" strategy the Gun Project Working Group designed was built on a simple, but crucially important, realization: that chronic offending made these youth, and the gangs they formed, extremely vulnerable. Authorities had a large and

varied menu of ways they could impose costs on these gangs - "levers to pull," as the group came to say. They could disrupt street drug activity, focus police attention on low-level street crimes like trespassing and public drinking, serve outstanding warrants, cultivate confidential informants for medium- and long-term investigations of gang activities, deliver strict probation and parole enforcement, seize drug proceeds and other assets, ensure stiffer plea bargains and sterner prosecutorial attention, request stronger bail terms (and actually enforce them), and even focus potentially very severe federal investigative and prosecutorial attention on, for instance, gang-related drug activity.

This was, of course, not news to the line-level personnel. The problem was that it was impossible to give all the gangs this kind of heightened attention all the time, and that occasional crackdowns, while useful in the short term, had little long-term impact. The ability to deliver quite overwhelming crackdowns, however, was not in doubt. The Working Group's innovation - again, simple but important - was to make it clear to gangs that in the future violence would draw such crackdowns, and then to continue to communicate with gangs as the resulting strategy unfolded. An essential part of the Ceasefire strategy was thus a systematic communications campaign, carried out in part through formal meetings, or "forums," between the Working Group and gangs, in which the Ceasefire antiviolence strategy was presented to gang members.

This changed the game rather dramatically. From a world in which the cost to a gang of committing a homicide was - perhaps - that a gang member would be caught and prosecuted (while "street" benefits like a reputation for toughness accrued to the gang as a whole), the cost soared to that original risk, plus everything else the authorities could bring to bear: cash-flow problems caused by street drug market disruption, arrests from outstanding warrants, the humiliation of strict probation enforcement, even the possibility of the severe sanctions brought by federal involvement. Those costs were borne by the whole gang, not just the shooter. As long as the authorities were confident that they knew what gangs were involved in a particular act of violence, as they usually were, these penalties were certain; the Working Group could always figure out ways to reach out and touch particular gangs. They were also swift: drug market disruption, heavy disorder enforcement, warrant service, probation attention, and the like could be deployed within days of a violent event. Rather than the response to violence being uncertain, slow, often not very severe, it became, with Ceasefire, certain, rapid, and of whatever range of severity the Working Group felt appropriate.

Talking regularly to the gangs served a number of purposes. Originally, the Working Group wanted to make sure that gangs knew about this new policy, so they could comply if they wished, and wanted to be able to tell other gangs when a gang was being punished for violence. It also wanted to make clear to gangs that while violence would bring strong attention, refraining from violence would not win them a "pass" to deal drugs or do other crimes: this was, in language the Working Group used explicitly in the gang meetings, "a promise, not a deal." Other purposes emerged as the strategy was actually implemented. One was to make cause and effect clear: to explain to the city's gangs that a particular drug raid, for instance, was but a means

to an end and was not about drugs as such but a penalty being imposed for violence. One was to bolster the Working Group's own credibility: to be able to say to gangs, in effect, "we said it, we meant it, and here's proof of that: here's what they did, here's what we did, here's how you steer clear." Another was to give gangs that appeared to be on the verge of trouble a dose of what the Working Group came to think of as "retail deterrence": to reach out to them and make it clear that actual violence would bring a strong response.

Perhaps most important, however, the Working Group came to realize that communication allowed the creation of a fundamentally different balance of power between the authorities and the streets. The Working Group could deploy, at best, only a few severe crackdowns at a time. But like an old-west sheriff facing down a band of desperadoes with one bullet in his gun, direct communication with gangs allowed the Working Group to say, we're ready, we're watching, we're waiting: who wants to be next?

The Ceasefire strategy was fully implemented by mid-May 1996, the time at which the first gang-specific crackdown, on Dorchester's Vamp Hill Kings, was completed and the meeting with gangs commenced. Handbills explaining that operation (see Figure 6) and "advertising" other gang-violence focused operations by the authorities (see Figure 7) were handed out widely to gang members. While the strategy had already been quietly briefed to key community leaders, the city also formally announced its new policies at this time. In late August, 1996, the Intervale Posse, widely viewed as the city's toughest crack-era gang, was largely dismantled in a Ceasefire operation carried out with the help of the DEA (see Figure 8). These operations were carried out in parallel with prevention activities spearheaded by the streetworkers, activist black clergy, and other community groups, who would support the "stop it" message to the gangs, offer gang members services, jobs, and other opportunities, and attempt to mediate disputes. More meetings, and one-on-one communication with gang members by BPD gang officers, probation officers, and streetworkers drove home the message that the Intervale operation had been prompted by the gang's violence, that the city would repeat if necessary, and that gangs wishing to avoid such attention need only refrain from hurting people.

The Ceasefire strategy was implemented primarily with resources already available to participating agencies, and for the most part utilized activities already within their repertoire (for instance, drug enforcement, warrant service, and probation supervision). Part way through implementation, the city was awarded a COPS gang grant, which helped fund overtime activity by BPD gang officers.

D. ASSESSMENT

The Ceasefire strategy was designed to reduce homicide victimization and other serious violence by and among Boston's gang youth. The Project generally regards this as a population age 24 and under (rather than the 21 and under framework with which the project began). In the two years the strategy has been underway, homicide victimization among those age 24 and under has fallen roughly 70% from the mean of the years 1991-1995 (see Figure 9). A detailed examination of gun assaults involving those age

24 and under in Roxbury, the city's most active neighborhood, shows comparable reductions (see Figure 10). While the Harvard team is conducting a formal evaluation utilizing advanced statistical techniques, these are declines substantially larger than other cities have seen over the same period, and are not explicable on the basis of demographics or the disappearance of gangs or drug markets (both of which remain, though both in lower-profile ways than before Ceasefire).

Perhaps most gratifying, it has not been necessary to continuously sanction gangs; no further operation of the Intervale scale has been necessary in the subsequent period. Working Group participants believe that as gang vendettas were interrupted, and the "temperature" on the streets went down, the self-sustaining cycle of violence, fear, "self defense" behavior, and more violence has also been interrupted. Perhaps most remarkably, gang members have themselves quietly reached out to the Working Group and pointed fingers at gangs threatening to disturb the peace.

Other information supports the belief that the Ceasefire strategy has made a meaningful impact. Both adults and young people in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan show an increased willingness to use public spaces; Joseph Chery, an anti-violence activist, reports that adults in his neighborhood are no longer afraid of young people and are once again exerting adult influence in the streets. The BPD recently completed a telephone survey of 3,000 Boston households to measure citizen opinion in a wide array of areas. Key findings included:

- Approximately 50-60% of residents in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan felt that the BPD does all that can reasonably be expected to reduce crime in their neighborhoods;
- More than a third of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan residents had a great deal of confidence in the ability of the BPD to prevent crime, as compared to 8-12% in 1995;
- Citywide, 76% of residents feel safe out alone in their neighborhoods at night, compared to only 55% in 1995;
- 88% of residents said that they would be willing to work with each other and police to reduce and prevent crime.

Other parties have found the process that generated Ceasefire, and the Ceasefire intervention itself, promising. The Clinton Administration has modeled its 27-city Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative on Ceasefire's gun trafficking component. A wide variety of jurisdictions have begun operations akin to Ceasefire, with Lowell, Massachusetts and Minneapolis, Minnesota already reporting positive results.² Planning efforts are underway in Chicago; Los Angeles; Detroit; Rochester and Syracuse, New York; Baltimore; Stockton, California; and a number of other cities. The Justice Department has just commenced a five-city initiative modeled on the Gun Project, with sites addressing crime concerns ranging from youth violence to

² Jacob R. Clark. "LEN Salutes Its 1997 People of the Year, the Boston Gun Project Working Group." *Law Enforcement News* Vol. 22, No. 480. December 31, 1997.

sexual assault. All the agencies involved in Ceasefire spend a great deal of time fielding inquiries and advising other jurisdictions.

Finally, the basic Boston partnership continues to adapt and evolve. A substantial jobs program has been launched, focused on active (at least previously) gang offenders; in a remarkable development, the program was launched through the leadership of Don Stern, the US Attorney. Prevention and diversion activities, through the streetworkers and others, are being enhanced. Based on its leadership in Ceasefire, the BPD has recently been given lead responsibility for shaping a city wide antitruancy effort. Nobody in Boston is declaring victory: but something substantial has been accomplished, and continues to be.