

**Prevention, Intervention, Enforcement:  
The Boston Strategy to Prevent Youth Violence**

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## **Introduction**

Over the past three years, Boston's most troubled neighborhoods – and the city as a whole – have experienced a remarkable turnaround in gang and gun violence. Since 1995, there has been a sixty-seven percent decrease in the annual homicide rate for victims under the age of twenty-four.

The strategy which gave rise to this extraordinary transformation is the collaborative brainchild of many governmental agencies, community groups and other institutions. Within each participating organization, different pieces of the strategy may go by different names: Operation Cease Fire, Operation Night Light, the Boston Gun Project or simply “working the streets.” No matter what the name, however, the end result of this strategy has been the achievement of a real, if fragile, alteration in the circumstances and attitudes which contribute to urban youth violence.

The police, the probation department, community and youth service workers, local clergy and educators have joined forces in Boston to prevent and respond to violence with both sanctions and alternative opportunities. Gang leaders and members are not only identified but engaged by various organizations. Word of potential conflict elicits a swift response from a special police unit. Gang members who engage in violent or provocative actions are assured that their gangs will feel the full weight of law enforcement, including prosecution for drunkenness, disorderly conduct, firearm and probation violations and more. Gang members who refrain from violence are plugged into training programs, church activities and job opportunities. Potential hot spots are flooded on short notice with enforcement and social service personnel. Constant, labor-intensive communication is maintained both on the street and among participating groups.

Although undeniably successful in reducing gang violence – especially gun violence – the Boston Strategy is by no means a cure-all. The guns remain, the lure of gang life remains, and the harsh limits to meaningful social opportunity remain all too apparent to the city's troubled youth.

But the Boston Strategy has made a difference – and can now be seen as an important innovation in the continuing effort to prevent youth violence.

# **The Boston Strategy to Prevent Youth Violence: A Brief History and Some Lessons Learned**

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Boston's success in preventing serious youth violence has, justifiably, generated a great deal of national attention. What happened, and what lessons should be drawn from what happened?

## ***YOUTH VIOLENCE IN BOSTON***

Boston experienced an epidemic of youth homicide beginning in roughly 1988-1989. While never as severe as in harder-hit cities of similar size, such as Washington DC, Baltimore, and New Orleans, the violence hit hard in the primarily poor and minority neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. As in other cities similarly hit by the national epidemic of youth violence, youth homicide in Boston began shortly after crack cocaine made its appearance in these neighborhoods. In 1990, the city's worst year historically for both youth and adult homicide, shootings were a daily occurrence; matters improved after 1990, but the violence remained at historically high and, more importantly, utterly unacceptable levels. Youth homicide in Boston was overwhelmingly associated with minority males, especially black males: of 374 victims 13-24 killed over 1988-1997 331, or 89%, were male, and 302, or 81%, were black. Youth homicide was also overwhelmingly associated with firearms, with nearly 90% of youth killed in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan falling victim to gun violence. It was also, apparently, in some way a gang problem. While Boston does not have and has never had organized Chicago- and Los Angeles-style gangs, by the late 1980s and early 1990s gangs and gang behavior were frequently noted in the city. These included the wearing of colors, the marking of turf with "sneaker trees" and graffiti, the intimidation of witnesses (one local jurist called on the National Guard to provide security in Boston courthouses), and what seemed to be ongoing vendettas or "beefs" between gangs.

## ***BOSTON RESPONDS***

The city's response was extraordinary. In the years immediately following the outbreak of youth violence, Boston quietly created what now stands as perhaps the nation's leading portfolio of youth violence prevention initiatives. It is, in fact, a portfolio too extensive and complex to capture economically; what follows is (in no particular order) this author's sense of the most central of these initiatives.

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## **The Youth Violence Strike Force**

The Boston Police Department created an elite youth violence prevention unit within its Bureau of Special Operations. Called first the Anti-Gang Violence Unit, and later the Youth Violence Strike Force (YVSF), the YVSF combined top Boston Police Department detectives and patrol officers who worked closely with front-line practitioners from agencies like the state police, probation, parole, the Department of Youth Services (DYS, juvenile corrections in Massachusetts), the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the US Attorney's office, and the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office. The YVSF was perfectly willing to use, and often did use, the full enforcement powers of the many participating agencies. It was also, however, equally committed to more classic "prevention" activities. It brokered connections between at-risk youth and social service agencies, launched the Summer of Opportunity youth employment program with the help of private-sector sponsors, raised money through YVSF athletic events for neighborhood groups, and the like. It also developed an innovative style of prevention-oriented law enforcement, for instance by building bridges between probation and police so that gang-involved probationers could pass information to the YVSF that a gang fight was brewing in time for YVSF officers to saturate the area and prevent actual hostilities.

## **The Streetworkers**

In 1991 the Mayor's Office chartered the Boston Streetworker social service program. The Streetworkers were charged with, as they often put it, "meeting the kids where they are" – that is, in the neighborhoods and on the street corners where at-risk and high-risk kids hung with their crews, dealt drugs, and suffered and perpetrated violence. The Streetworkers tried to connect them with services, keep them out of trouble, mediate disputes, and the like. They were not in the enforcement business, their loyalties were to the youth, they often looked and sounded like the kids they hung out with, and they often mistrusted the police and were in turn mistrusted by police. They were, however, respected by the officers of the YVSF, and some at least of the Streetworkers in turn respected the YVSF.

## **The Ten Point Coalition**

The Ten Point Coalition was a group of activist black clergy formed in the wake of a watershed moment, the Morningstar Baptist Church incident. In 1992, gang members invaded the Morningstar Baptist Church, where a slain gang rival was being memorialized, and attacked mourners with knives and guns. The Ten Point Coalition formed in response, reaching out to gang- and drug-involved youth, walking the streets late into the night, and organizing within Boston's black community. Ten Point was spearheaded by the Rev. Eugene Rivers, an outspoken, confrontational black minister who was often strongly critical of the police department. Rivers and the YVSF ultimately, however, forged a strong working relationship with Rivers, cemented around an incident in which a street drug dealer with whom Rivers had been locking horns shot up his house in Dorchester. The YVSF solved

the case and induced the young man to surrender; he did, and included an apology to Rivers in the process.

## **Operation Night Light**

Operation Night Light is a community probation program in which probation officers patrol in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan in the evening in partnership with YVSF officers, doing curfew checks on probationers, enforcing probationers' area and enforcement restrictions, and the like. Created in 1992 by Dorchester Court Probation Officers William Stewart and Richard Skinner and YVSF Detectives Bobby Merner and Bobby Frattalia, Night Light has since been instituted statewide and received national recognition. The program was born of a mutual recognition by probation officers and Boston Police Department gang officers that they were working with the same kids, who were often both the perpetrators and victims of violence. Putting some backbone into probation was a way both to stiffen the sanction of a sentence to probation and to keep high-risk kids out of trouble by keeping them inside at night and out of the rival gang areas their probation conditions technically forbade them to enter.

What emerged in Boston in the early 1990s was an extensive network of singularly dedicated front-line practitioners: with a remarkable mix of capacities, well-informed about what was happening on the streets at any given moment, and with a guiding, bedrock pragmatism. If Tracy Litthcut, director of the Streetworkers, got wind that two gangs were going to be beefing, he could quietly get word to the YVSF, which could flood the area with officers to prevent an incident. If a YVSF officer realized, in the course of such an operation, that the gang member driving the dispute was under Department of Youth Services (DYS) community supervision, she could reach out to friends at DHS and arrange for the youth to be picked up and held in a DHS facility until matters calmed down. YVSF officers cracking down on a gang could offer members introductions to Litthcut and Rivers, who could broker social services, job referrals, and the like, or perhaps hold out the promise of a slot in the Summer of Opportunity. Probation officers alerted by one of their charges that another kid was a danger - or *in danger* - on the streets could let the YVSF know, which would, if warranted, make arrests and take people off the streets without hesitation.

All the key actors involved in these operations - the police, probation, Ten Point, Streetworkers - shared a basic sensibility regarding youth violence and chronic youth offenders. They believed that the violence was a product of the havoc crack had wrought in Boston's minority community. They believed that many youthful offenders had been failed by the institutions that were supposed to nurture and protect them - their communities, their families, the economy, the schools, the police, even perhaps their churches. They therefore believed that such young offenders needed, and deserved, all the help they could get. They also believed, however, that such young offenders, on any given day and at any given time, could be extremely dangerous, to the community and to themselves, and that where necessary they equally needed to be controlled.

This world-view partook of both traditionally liberal and traditionally conservative positions without, in fact, becoming conventionally doctrinaire.

As close as they were to the streets, the YVSF, probation, Ten Point, and Streetworkers had developed their own ideology with regard to the violent young: we'll help you if we can, we'll stop you if we must.

## ***THE BOSTON GUN PROJECT***

Beginning in early 1995, this coalition welcomed the author and his Harvard team, creating the Boston Gun Project Working Group. The Project, sponsored by a grant from the National Institute of Justice, was an attempt to systematically apply community and problem-solving policing principles to the problem of youth homicide in Boston. Over 1995 and early 1996, principals from all the groups noted above (and others) met regularly at YVSF headquarters in an attempt to answer one fundamental question: what is driving the violence, and what, if anything, can we do that will make a substantial impact in the near term? Working Group members shared history and perspectives, conducted and analyzed research, and ultimately crafted what is now known as the Cease Fire intervention.

### **Gangs**

The Working Group began, most fundamentally, with the perspective on the streets presented by its practitioner members. These members were adamant that youth violence in Boston was a problem committed by, and against, chronically offending gang members.

“Every time we lose a kid, we know them, and every time a kid kills another kid, we know the shooter,” said Billy Stewart, and others on the working group echoed him. There were, by this account, a relatively small number of youth at high risk for both killing and being killed: they were gang members; they were chronically in trouble with the authorities; and working group members knew them, often personally, because they were participating in gang activities, getting arrested a lot, on probation and in prison, and otherwise making themselves known both on and off the streets. Working group members could not necessarily predict who would get killed, or who would do the killing, but they could, they said, say with some authority from which relatively small universe these kids would come.

In particular, they said, chronic “beefs” between gangs could be counted on to generate casualties. According to police, probation, and the Streetworkers, these beefs, or vendettas, were the primary drivers of youth violence in the city. Sparked by some dispute or other - perhaps business, perhaps personal - they took on a life of their own and could persist for years, even after most or all involved had forgotten their origins. They could lie dormant for long periods and then flare up upon re-provocation - because rival gang members ran into one another in school, on the street, or in clubs - or for no apparent reason at all. Much of the energy of the YVSF, probation, and the Streetworkers went to defusing, or failing that containing, these beefs.

Gun Project research bore them out. This research suggested that from 60% to perhaps 80% of all youth homicide (defined originally as victimization among those 21 and under, and later as victimization among

those 24 and under) was connected with a dynamic among some 61 “gangs” - small, mostly disorganized street crews - with a total membership of only about 1,300, less than 1% of the city’s youth in those age ranges. Both victims and offenders tended to have extensive arrest records, probation histories, and often prior incarcerations. The main driver of gang hostilities appeared to be not drug or other business interests but personal matters, like “respect” and “disrespect”, and long-standing “beefs.”

The Working Group practitioners also believed that fear and a desire for self-protection was driving much of this gang dynamic. Even relatively hard-core gang members, they believed, were scared on the street (and for good reason, given their victimization rate), and were getting and carrying guns, acting tough, and attacking their rivals in the hope of protecting themselves.

The implications of these findings and beliefs were sobering. It seemed unlikely that classic prevention activities such as dispute resolution training would have much impact on these entrenched, hard-core offenders. It seemed unlikely that classic criminal justice activities would have much impact either; there was little that the criminal justice community could threaten to do to these offenders that matched what they already faced on the street. Nor could the police and prosecutors realistically aspire - even if they’d wanted, which most didn’t - to take all 1,300 gang-involved youth off the street for long periods. And nobody knew how to make the gangs go away.

As the Working Group process continued, however, a new focus emerged: *to control the dynamic of disputes within and among gangs* which seemed to be generating most of the violence. Even with gangs, and with a certain amount of gang crime, would it be possible to minimize the level of violence, and in so doing to let gangs “relax” with respect to their enemies?

## **The Cease Fire Intervention**

The “Cease Fire” 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. They could not treat all gangs like this all the time, but they could hope to ensure that all gangs that committed a serious violent act received such attention for some meaningful period. And, in a lesson learned from operations that the YVSF and its partners had already mounted against violent gangs in Roxbury and Dorchester, they could reach out directly to

gangs and make sure that they understood that this was now the result that violence would produce.

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 sever 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 serve, it became, with Cease Fire, certain, rapid, and of whatever range of severity the Working Group felt appropriate.

Beginning in mid-1996, the wide range of agencies represented on the Working Group began applying the Cease Fire strategy. Meeting between the working group and gang members (usually those on probation), with young jail inmates, and solo contacts between gang officers, probation officers, Streetworkers, and street offenders delivered the new "stop it" message. At the same time, Streetworkers, Ten Point, probation officers and others made renewed offers of services. Gangs that violated the new rules - as it transpired, one in Dorchester and one in Roxbury - were the subject of focused crackdowns. New meetings with the rest of the gang landscape kept them apprised of the authorities' actions. The Streetworkers focused on the gangs that had been intervened with and worked hard to consolidate the peace. Street intelligence about imminent trouble within or between gangs was met with what the Working Group came to thought of as "retail deterrence": gang officers, probation officers, or Streetworkers would reach out directly to relevant gang members and tell them directly that if trouble actually occurred, a crackdown would follow. With a rapidity that shocked Gun Project participants, the streets calmed down. And while continued Cease Fire warnings to gangs were occasionally necessary, and actual crackdowns even more occasionally necessary, it appears at this writing that the more time passes, the calmer they get.

## ***LESSONS LEARNED***

Contrary to what one might think from much of the public portrayal of the Boston experience, nobody involved in youth violence prevention in the city is anywhere near declaring victory. While the killing is currently down to below even pre-crack levels, both the guns and the gangs remain in the neighborhoods. (A continued focus on illegal gun trafficking to youth remains part of the Boston program.) Fear appears to remain at unacceptable levels, particularly among gang-involved youth. The basic

social agenda for the city's troubled neighborhoods - jobs, schools, family support, health care, and the rest - continues to need attention. And, recently, the apparent emergence of a new gang problem among middle school children suggests that a new round of innovation may be necessary.

At the same time, something substantial has been accomplished. What are the key lessons from the Boston experience thus far? They include, at least, the following:

- It was possible in Boston, and may be possible elsewhere, to intervene effectively and more or less directly in serious youth violence. This goal is not necessarily dependent on doing something profound about youth crime as such, gangs as such, crack and crack markets, the availability of firearms, or social and economic conditions in troubled neighborhoods. It is also not necessarily dependent on the widespread use of draconian criminal sanctions, routinely treating juvenile offenders as adults, and the like.
- Much of what we have feared about violent youth in the recent past - that they are "super-predators," immune to intervention, without feeling - is wrong. If Boston's experience is borne out elsewhere, much violent youth behavior is an understandable, if still deplorable, response to particular historical (crack) and local (high risk) conditions. If those conditions change, and if adults create a structure of incentives and punishments that actually make sense to young offenders, they will respond.
- Deterrence can be made to work. Nobody can say exactly what contribution the Cease Fire intervention made to controlling youth violence in Boston, and to what extent it was dependent on the altogether heroic prevention efforts that had already been made, continued to be made alongside the Cease Fire intervention, and continue to be made today. It does appear, however, that the "focused deterrence" of the Cease Fire intervention was a necessary *addition* to this mix, and that criminal justice agencies can deliver, if in new ways, on their old goal of deterring serious violence. Replication of the basic Cease Fire approach in Minneapolis and Lowell, Massachusetts also appears to have been successful, with Minneapolis experiencing a 50% reduction in homicide (across all age ranges) since the city launched its intervention in June of 1997.
- The direct control of youth violence, and perhaps other forms of serious criminal offending, is from a larger perspective a *partial but critical* goal. Reducing violence is not a sufficient end, where young people remain frightened and often hopeless. It is a step, however, that greatly eases addressing further and deeper goals. It is easier to improve the schools when young people are not afraid to attend them, easier to attract jobs when employers are not afraid of youth, and easier to revitalize communities when the streets are safe and property values increasing.

- The structured, sustained, ambitious problem-solving process represented by the Boston Gun Project is worthwhile. Whether focused on crime problems or other problems, and whether the participants are drawn mainly from criminal justice agencies or elsewhere, this kind of rigorous but open-ended strategic planning process should be essayed against other problems. In particular, public policy should benefit more routinely from policymaking processes that incorporate the perspective, experience, and knowledge of first-rate front-line practitioners.