



# Project Safe Neighborhoods: Strategic Interventions

## Offender Notification Meetings: Case Study 2

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## Overview

The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed significant declines in the rate of crime in the United States. This was true for most types of crime, including homicide and serious violent crime.<sup>1</sup> Despite these declines, the level of gun crime in the United States remains higher than that experienced in other western democracies and is a source of untold tragedy for families and communities.<sup>2</sup> Given this context, in 2001 the Bush Administration made the reduction of gun crime one of the top priorities of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), along with combating terrorism and enhancing homeland security.

The vehicle for translating this priority into action is Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN). PSN represents a commitment to gun crime reduction through a network of local partnerships coordinated through the nation's 94 U.S. Attorneys' Offices. These local partnerships are supported by a strategy to provide them with the resources that they need to be successful.

The PSN initiative integrates five essential elements from successful gun crime reduction programs, such as Richmond's Project Exile, the Boston Operation Ceasefire Program, and DOJ's Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative. Those elements are: partnerships, strategic planning, training, outreach, and accountability. The partnership element requires that the local U.S. Attorney create workable and sustainable partnerships with other federal, state, and local law enforcement; prosecutors; and the community. Strategic problem-solving involves the use of data and research to isolate the key factors driving gun crime at the local level, suggest intervention strategies, and provide feedback and evaluation to the task force. The outreach component incorporates communication strategies geared at both offenders ("focused deterrence") and the community ("general deterrence"). The training element underscores the importance of ensuring that each person involved in the gun crime reduction effort—from the line police officer to the prosecutor to the community outreach worker—has the skills necessary to be most effective. Finally, the accountability element ensures that the task force regularly receives feedback about the impact of its interventions so that adjustments can be made if necessary.

### Partnerships

The PSN program is intended to increase partnerships between federal, state, and local agencies through the formation of a local PSN task force. Coordinated by the U.S. Attorney's Office, the PSN task

force typically includes both federal and local prosecutors, federal law enforcement agencies, local and state law enforcement agencies, and probation and parole. Nearly all PSN task forces also include local government leaders, social service providers, neighborhood leaders, members of the faith community, business leaders, educators, and health care providers.

### **Strategic Planning**

Recognizing that crime problems, including gun crime, vary from community to community across the United States, that state laws addressing gun crime vary considerably, and that local and state resources vary across the federal judicial districts covered by U.S. Attorneys' Offices, PSN also includes a commitment to strategic planning whereby the PSN program is tailored to local context. Specifically, PSN provides resources for the inclusion of a local research partner who works with the PSN task force to analyze the local gun crime problem and to share the findings with the task force for the development of a proactive plan for gun crime reduction. The research partners assist the task force through analysis of gun crime patterns and trends that can help the task force focus resources on the most serious people, places, and contexts of gun violence. The research partners can also bring evidence-based practice to the task force discussions of gun crime reduction strategies.<sup>3</sup> The inclusion of the research partner was also intended to assist in ongoing assessment in order to provide feedback to the task force.

Although each district creates strategic interventions that make sense in their local context, one strategy shared by all PSN task forces is increased federal prosecution of gun crime. PSN is built on the belief that the increased federal prosecution of gun offenders will reduce gun crime through the incapacitation of gun criminals and the deterrence of potential offenders. This working hypothesis is based on the notion that federal sanctions for gun crime are often more severe than those either available at the state level or likely to be imposed at the state level. Further, federal prosecution may include sanctions unavailable at the local level. The focus on prohibited persons possessing or using a firearm is built on the finding that a significant portion of gun crime involves offenders and victims with significant criminal histories. Thus, by increasing the certainty that a prohibited person in possession will face strong federal sanctions, the goal is to persuade potential offenders not to illegally possess and carry a gun.

The commitment to increased federal prosecution appears to be borne out. Fiscal year 2005 witnessed over 13,000 individuals charged with federal gun crimes, the highest number ever recorded by DOJ. Since PSN's inception, the number of federal firearms prosecutions has increased 73 percent.<sup>4</sup>

## Training

PSN has involved a significant commitment of resources to support training. This program has included training provided to law enforcement agencies on topics including gun crime investigations, gun crime identification and tracing, and related issues. Training on effective prosecution of gun cases has been provided to state and local prosecutors. Additional training has focused on strategic problem-solving and community outreach and engagement. By the end of 2005, DOJ estimates that nearly 18,000 individuals had attended a PSN-related training program sponsored by one of the many national PSN training and technical assistance partners.<sup>5</sup>

## Outreach

The architects of PSN also recognized that increased sanctions would have the most impact if accompanied with a media campaign to communicate the message of the likelihood of federal prosecution for illegal possession and use of a gun. Consequently, resources were provided to all PSN task forces to work with a media partner to devise strategies for communicating this message to both potential offenders and to the community at large. This local outreach effort is also supported at the national level by the creation and distribution of Public Service Announcements and materials (ads, posters). These materials are direct mailed to media outlets and are also available to local PSN task forces.<sup>6</sup>

The outreach component is also intended to support the development of prevention and intervention components. PSN provided grant funding in fiscal years 2003 and 2004 to the local PSN partnerships that could be used to support a variety of initiatives including prevention and intervention. Many initiatives were built on existing programs such as school-based prevention, Weed and Seed, or juvenile court intervention programs.

## Accountability

The leadership of the PSN initiative at DOJ has emphasized that PSN would focus on outcomes—i.e., reduced gun crime—as opposed to a focus on outputs such as arrests and cases prosecuted. That is, PSN's success is measured by the reduction in gun crime. This accountability component was linked to strategic planning whereby PSN task forces, working with their local research partner, are asked to monitor levels of crime over time within targeted problems and/or targeted areas.

## Additional Information

For more information on Project Safe Neighborhoods, visit [www.psn.gov](http://www.psn.gov). If you are interested in supporting your local Project Safe Neighborhoods program, please contact your local U.S. Attorney's Office.



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# Offender Notification Meetings

**P**roject Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) was developed in 2001 as the U.S. Department of Justice's (DOJ) initiative for responding to and significantly reducing gun crime in the United States.<sup>7</sup> PSN represents a commitment to gun crime reduction through a network of local partnerships coordinated through the nation's 94 U.S. Attorneys Offices (USAOs). These local partnerships are supported by a strategy to provide them with the resources that they need to be successful.

A series of promising practices and interventions has emerged in PSN sites across the country. Not all are utilized in all PSN sites, and those that are implemented are adapted to fit local contexts. Yet, these strategic interventions and practices are being utilized by a number of PSN task forces with promising results. The initial set of PSN case studies focuses on four of these practices: crime incident reviews, gun prosecution case screening, chronic violent offender lists, and offender notification meetings. The current study focuses on offender notification meetings.

The concept of offender notification meetings enhances the PSN program by focusing resources through targeted enforcement.<sup>8</sup> This strategy's purpose is twofold: first, it attempts to send a specific or focused deterrence message to a group of high-risk individuals that gun violence will not be tolerated. Second, it attempts to communicate that, as a community, local area programs are willing to provide services to help these individuals succeed in creating a better and more productive life. As part of this message, potential offenders are told that any future gun violence will result in the full force of federal and local law enforcement authorities being focused on the groups involved.

## Background of Offender Notification Meetings

Specific deterrence programs have a long history in criminal justice. Programs such as intensive probation supervision and penalty enhancement legislation have attempted to deter specific individuals from future acts of violence. Offender notification meetings build on these programs but extend the concept of focused deterrence through direct face-to-face communication with high-risk individuals.

Offender notification meetings as a firearm reduction strategy may have first been implemented by the Boston Police Department (BPD) in 1996 in a program named Operation Ceasefire. This program tar-

geted high-risk offenders with a strong deterrence message: that the use of guns would result in specific enforcement and prosecution actions against those individuals. In addition, high-risk offenders who attended these meetings were offered a variety of services including substance abuse programs, employment training programs, and educational assistance programs.

Operation Ceasefire developed as a response to increasing gun violence in Boston during the early 1990s. In 1995, as gun violence was escalating, it became clear that a large proportion of the violence was being perpetrated by a small number of gang-involved youth. The BPD, working with a team of researchers from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, were looking for a way to send a more direct message about gun violence to offenders. Because existing gun violence strategies did not seem to be working, officials from the BPD felt that a new way to get a message to young offenders was needed. They decided that the best method would be to get those individuals most involved in violence together in one place and deliver a strong deterrence message directly to them. Research indicated that a majority of the gun violence in the city, particularly gun homicides, was gang related. Therefore, the BPD decided to target a set of the most violent members of a limited number of gangs as an initial focus for this developing strategy.

A working group of representatives from a wide variety of enforcement and municipal organizations was formed to help develop the strategy. This group consisted of representatives from the BPD; the U.S. Attorney's Office; probation, parole, the Department of Youth Services; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF); the Streetworkers Program; and the local clergy. This group guided the decisions about implementation and focus of the strategy.

While the threat that gun violence would be met with increased law enforcement attention is not new, two critical elements made this strategy different. First, groups or networks of offenders involved in gun violence were brought into the meetings and were told they would be held accountable for gun violence committed by any group member. Second, the increased law enforcement threat was balanced with an offer of assistance. This balanced approach to dealing with potential gun offenders was viewed as credible by local community members who supported the effort because offenders were being given a chance to turn their life around and were being targeted only if they turned down the services and refused to curtail their gun violence.

The working group also decided that the message of this new strategy would need to be communicated in multiple ways. The group felt that in addition to the targeted offenders, other potential offenders and members of the community needed to hear about this new initiative. One fear of the group was that other gangs might attempt to take advantage of the gangs being targeted, feeling that they might be less

willing to retaliate. In addition, the working group strongly felt that members of the community, particularly those living in the target area, needed to know about the strategy. While the meetings with high-risk individuals were a major component of the strategy, the message had to be sent in other ways at the same time to a broader audience. Other groups such as the streetworkers had a different level of credibility and could reinforce the message in alternative ways. Toward this end, streetworkers communicated the same message—that firearm violence would not be tolerated—to individuals living in the target neighborhood. Probation officers sent the same message to their clients who might be involved in firearm violence or gangs, and flyers were distributed in neighborhoods describing recent federal sentences brought against gang members who had continued their gun crime.

The Boston Operation Ceasefire initiative witnessed a dramatic decrease in youth homicide and gun violence. Indeed, there was an approximate 65 percent reduction in youth gun violence following the implementation of Operation Ceasefire.<sup>9</sup> Based on this success, a number of other cities implemented similar approaches. In Indianapolis, a working group consisting of representatives from the Indianapolis Police Department, U.S. Attorney's Office, ATF, Marion County Prosecutor's Office, and researchers implemented the Indianapolis Violence Reduction Partnership. This partnership focused on high-risk probationers and parolees to send a similar message that firearm violence would not be tolerated.<sup>10</sup> In the Hollenbeck section of Los Angeles a group consisting of representatives from the Los Angeles Police Department, U.S. Attorney's Office, and District Attorney's Office developed an offender notification strategy that focused on the most active members of a set of the most violent gangs currently operating in that section of Los Angeles.<sup>11</sup>

## Problem Analysis

Under Project Safe Neighborhoods, many communities have begun to focus increased attention on gun violence occurring in their neighborhoods. PSN has demonstrated that a comprehensive approach to dealing with gun violence problems appears to be the most effective strategy. This comprehensive approach can involve a wide variety of strategies including increased federal prosecution, creation of high-risk offender lists, development of multi-agency task forces, and gun crime incident review meetings. Regardless of the strategy implemented, one problem all communities face is how to get the message about this new emphasis on gun crime out to those individuals most at risk to commit gun violence. In at least 36 of the PSN sites, offender notification meetings have been selected as part of the approach to communicating the deterrence message.

The wide acceptance of these meetings as part of an overall deterrence approach lies in their ability to focus on those most dangerous

individuals in a community, to send a specific message that violence will not be tolerated, to eliminate any anonymity offenders may have thought they had, and to balance this enforcement approach with an offer of services to help offenders get their lives focused in a positive direction. The fact that offender notification meetings have been adopted so widely is also an indication that the strategy is seen by many communities as a viable part of a firearm violence reduction strategy.

## Goals of Offender Notification Meetings

The goals of offender notification meetings are to:

- Communicate a focused deterrence message to a targeted group of high-risk offenders at risk for gun crime.
- Promise a coordinated and aggressive law enforcement response to firearms violence.
- Communicate this message to individuals not yet involved in violence but thought to be “on the verge.”
- Make offenders more visible to police and the community, thereby reducing their feelings of being able to act with impunity.
- Augment the aggressive law enforcement approach with support services including assistance in locating housing, vocational and employment services, educational services, and substance abuse programming.

## Partners Involved in Offender Notification Meetings

Across the country, diverse representatives take part in offender notification meetings. The groups can be viewed as representing the two approaches that are being communicated to high-risk individuals at the meeting: those representing law enforcement and those representing services that are being made available to the targeted individuals.

Law enforcement can be represented at these meeting by individuals from agencies including the U.S. Attorney’s Office, local District Attorney’s Office, local police, ATF, state police, sheriffs and county police, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), probation, parole, Department of Corrections, U.S. Marshals, judges, or any other law enforcement agency that is active locally.

Like the message from law enforcement, the message from service providers is critical. These local organizations provide many services including employment, housing, substance abuse, and educational support. Specifically, some of the individuals who may participate include drug treatment counselors, job training and placement coor-

dinators, neighborhood leaders, and members of the clergy who work in the neighborhoods.

In a number of communities, a third group has become involved in offender notification meetings: those who have had to live with the after-effects of gun violence. Paralleling the use of victim impact statements in restorative justice settings, these individuals communicate the impact gun violence has had on their families or neighborhoods. In Brockton, Massachusetts, a father whose son was killed in a gang shooting speaks about how easy it was for his son to become involved in the gang and the impact of his son's death on the entire family. In Los Angeles, members of the communities being targeted speak about the impact of the violence on their lives. These individuals in many communities offer themselves as resources to the at-risk individuals at the meeting.

## Description of Intervention

The first step in implementing an offender notification program is to identify the group to receive the message. In most jurisdictions, this is done after a detailed analysis of the gun violence problem in the community. This analysis may reveal a hot spot area or a particular gang or group that is responsible for much of the gun violence. As prior research suggests, it is generally more effective to focus resources on a target location or a target group than to implement community-wide strategies. In Indianapolis, for example, the analysis revealed that the majority of gun homicides were tied to youths in existing groups or gangs who were involved in the drug trade in some way. Consequently, the Indianapolis working group focused their initial offender notification meetings on individuals from these groups. In Los Angeles, the working group identified the Hollenbeck section of the city as a hot spot for gun violence and, because of the large number of gang-involved individuals, the working group initially focused their offender notification meetings on members of the most violent Hollenbeck area gangs. In Lowell, Massachusetts, research indicated that much of the gun violence problem involved Asian gangs. These gangs were led by older members of the Asian community who were also involved in illegal gaming operations in Lowell. The Lowell police reached out to this group and communicated with them directly.

If the strategy is to be effective, it is important that the targets for the meetings be limited and focused on serious gun crime offenders in the community. This may not always be the most serious offenders, but it must include individuals who are at high risk of involvement in gun violence. For example, St. Louis has determined that the most serious offenders will be assigned to the community's Most Violent Persons (MVP) list for intensive law enforcement attention and those involved at a slightly lower level of violence will be directed to the offender notification meeting, saving notification meetings for the more responsive offenders. If the meetings become too broad, including youths who

have no history of gun violence, those attending may view the effort as business as usual and see no real threat of increased police attention.

### Identifying Participants

In each jurisdiction, it is important that the working group identify the specific individuals they want to attend the offender notification meeting. Specific criteria need to be used to identify these individuals. With the help of information sources such as the local law enforcement gang database, state criminal offender history files, probation and parole records, local community policing officers, and local community leaders, agencies have been able to identify specific individuals who are responsible for a great deal of the gun violence.

One innovative source for identifying high-risk individuals has been individuals whose names surface as persons of interest in multiple previous shootings. Research has demonstrated that these individuals have an increased likelihood of appearing as a victim or offender in subsequent shootings. In police departments with the capacity to search homicide files for such individuals, this approach may prove to be very successful. In Rochester, New York, and Indianapolis, a number of individuals whose name had appeared as a suspect or as a witness in multiple previous shootings were targeted for meetings and additional enforcement strategies.

Once a list of individuals is developed, the next challenge involves getting them to attend the meetings. It makes sense that active gun offenders will be unlikely to attend a gun violence meeting hosted by the local police department without some incentive. Each jurisdiction implementing offender notification meetings is faced with the task of identifying which “levers” they might use to encourage or compel the targeted offenders to attend the notification meeting. The most common lever is probation or parole status. Here, working group members identify who among the target group are presently under probation or parole supervision. The probation or parole officer then requires that the individual attend the meeting. Research done in Indianapolis, Boston, St. Louis, and a number of other cities has documented that a large proportion of the targeted high-risk individuals have active terms of probation, parole, or in some cases, both.

While probation and parole are the most common attendance levers, in other jurisdictions other levers have been used. These include being committed to the state youth authority or taking part in a specialized gun court.

Many jurisdictions have developed ways to encourage attendance among those individuals who are not currently under legal jurisdiction. In High Point, North Carolina, a letter sent directly from the local police chief was enough to encourage some high-risk individuals to attend the meeting. In a number of instances, the letter was accompa-

#### **Focus on Individuals at High-Risk for Gun Violence**

One of the PSN challenges is to focus on individuals at high risk for being involved in gun crime as either perpetrators or victims. While there is a tendency to use the broad contours of the patterns of gun violence, such as gang and drug involvement, to select a broad group of probationers and parolees for participation in the meetings, the strongest evidence of the impact of offender notification meetings comes from the experience of Boston Ceasefire, the early Indianapolis group-focused meetings, and the targeted meetings in the Middle District of North Carolina. In all these sites, the meetings appeared most effective when street-level knowledge about current gun violence was coupled with careful analysis of group connections and prior criminal histories.

The analysis by the PSN research partner from Rochester, New York, is informative. Despite a general connection between illegal drug sales and gun violence, when looking at the criminal histories of probationers, involvement in drug

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nied with direct outreach to parents to encourage their children—typically sons—to attend the offender notification meeting. Additional avenues to encourage attendance that have been successful in other communities include having school officials recommend attendance, having influential community leaders such as community program directors or local clergy encourage attendance, and finally, having officials encourage those who are required to attend to bring a friend who might benefit from some of the programs that will be discussed. In some jurisdictions, family members who have participated in “nightlite” type programs have encouraged their children to attend.<sup>12</sup>

### Delivering the Message

Offender notification meetings are part threat and part offer of assistance. In general, law enforcement officials begin the meeting by telling those in attendance why they are there. They discuss how this approach is new, let offenders know that law enforcement agencies have their names and photographs, and make clear that future violence will result in a highly coordinated effort to take them off the street and put them in jail or prison. This approach is directly linked to reducing the anonymity that many offenders feel. These meetings significantly reduce this impression of being “under the radar screen” of local law enforcement. In these meetings, young men and women are confronted face-to-face by local police and prosecutors who know their names and tell them that they will be held personally responsible and accountable for future violence. The Middle District of North Carolina has employed very innovative strategies in breaking down offender anonymity. When possible, law enforcement officials will develop information about where or with whom a meeting attendee was “hanging out” in previous days. This will then be scripted into the meeting message with the result of warning attendees that law enforcement is really paying attention to the activities of these probationers and parolees.

In many jurisdictions, a representative from the U.S. Attorney’s Office leads the meeting and explains to the target group how they may be prosecuted at the federal level, resulting in a longer sentence that will be served far away from the local community. This reinforces the PSN message and also delivers the federal prosecution message, an effective tool in most communities because of the severity of federal sentences. In addition to the U.S. Attorney, representatives from local law enforcement and probation or parole will talk about how they will increase surveillance on any group that continues engaging in violence. Other enforcement officials representing agencies such as ATF, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and ICE may also discuss how they could involve the target group in active investigations and the likely consequences. Experiences from across the country indicate that for these messages to be effective, they must be short and sharp, with a strong focus on the central message.

offenses was not predictive of gun crime. However, when drug charges were coupled with a prior history of gun possession and/or violent crime, there was a much greater likelihood of being involved in gun violence. The lesson learned is that the focused deterrence approach is more powerful if directed at those offenders who combine drug use or distribution with a history of gun possession, violent crime, and/or gang involvement. This is central to one of the goals of the offender notification meeting—breaking down anonymity through the message: “We know you and your associates are involved in illegal gun possession and use.”

### Group Accountability

One of the lessons from the Boston Operation Ceasefire experience was that much gun offending includes a group component. These may be formal gangs or they may be groups of offenders that hang together and are often involved in various illegal activities. This group component was used in Boston to identify groups of probationers and parolees to bring into offender notification meetings. Specifically, when individuals were identified as being involved in gun violence, street level intelligence was used to identify their associates. When these associates were on probation or parole, they would be ordered into a notification meeting.

The intent of the group meeting is to move beyond a specific deterrence model focused on individuals and to a focused group deterrence model whereby networks of likely offenders and victims communicate among themselves about the increased risk of law enforcement attention given continued gun crime. This model has been adopted by several PSN task forces, including the Southern District of Indiana and the Middle Dis-

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It is important to note that the message is not that reduced violence will result in law enforcement looking the other way regarding other illegal activity that the group may be involved in, such as drug dealing. These meetings are not to negotiate or “make deals” with potential offenders; rather, they are intended to communicate that continued violence will result in an unprecedented increase in the level of law enforcement attention.

In communities where these meetings have been a component of an overall gun violence reduction strategy, working group members have found that the meetings need to present a balanced approach to deterring future violence. In addition to the “stick” described above, it is equally important that some “carrots” be included to offer assistance. The second part of the meeting in most jurisdictions involves a discussion of programs and services that are available to the target group to help them turn their life around. The most common services are employment services—either job training or job placement programs. In many cases, employers who will hire high-risk individuals, such as those attending the meeting, are identified and matched with individuals. Another common service is substance abuse counseling. Many individuals who are involved with violence are also facing substance abuse problems. Involving these individuals in a program that can help them address their addictions can also reduce their involvement in high-risk situations and behavior. Other services may be offered to the target group, such as education assistance, housing assistance, life skills training, and parenting skills programs. It is important that the two messages be integrated. In one example from Indianapolis, a Deputy Police Chief told attendees, “You can either work with the folks offering these services or you will work with me.” It was a simple and clear choice.

In a number of jurisdictions, the presentation also includes a discussion of the need for offenders to change their lifestyle. This message is most appropriately delivered by a respected community member, such as a member of the local clergy, someone from a program who has worked with offenders from that community, an ex-offender, or possibly a victim of the violence that the program is trying to eliminate. If done correctly, these individuals can send a powerful message about the impact that violence can have on families and on the offenders themselves. The *Boston Globe* recently published an article on victims of gun violence in Boston, not those who were killed but those who were disabled by gunshot wounds. This could present a powerful message about what the future may hold for the at-risk persons who have been called together in this meeting. Similar approaches are used in Indianapolis and the Middle District of North Carolina, where they use a PowerPoint show of victims and prosecuted offenders at the start of the meeting.<sup>13</sup>

The meetings alone are not sufficient to communicate the message of this new coordinated approach to curbing gun violence. It is impor-



tant that other criminal justice and non-criminal justice partners spread the word about this new approach to others in the community. As mentioned above, probation and parole officers can alert their clients to the new strategy. In communities that have streetworkers, they can send the same message to other at-risk youths in the neighborhoods. Equally important, members of the community need to help send the message that violence will not be tolerated. It is when respected community members support this new strategy that it appears most credible and legitimate to potential offenders and victims. In one example in Los Angeles, community members formed Community Assessment Teams to work with families of high-risk individuals.

### Follow-up

The follow-up to these meetings may be more significant than the meetings themselves. Realistically, one meeting will not change the lifestyle of an offender, but with substantial follow-up this goal may be accomplished. In communities that have established offender notification meetings, the initial reaction from many participants is that this approach is nothing different from other strategies they have heard about over the years. To change this mind-set, the threat of increased law enforcement activity targeting groups who continue to engage in violence must be real. It is essential after a group is put on notice that, if they continue to engage in gun violence, law enforcement has the ability and goal to follow through on the threat of a significantly increased and coordinated response. If there are impediments to coordinating the law enforcement agencies or an unwillingness to act on the threat, the offender notification meetings will be viewed as not credible, and future meetings will be ignored. The response may include a wide variety of actions, such as directed police patrol in the targeted neighborhood, police-probation-parole home visits, drug testing of probationers and parolees, and warrant service. All of these strategies are intended to convey the message that continued gun violence will result in “all levers being pulled.”<sup>14</sup>

In Indianapolis and in Boston, the threat was only considered real after the U.S. Attorney, in coordination with the district attorney and the local police, acted on the threat against major gangs who refused to stop the violence. Communicating the results of these crackdowns against groups and individuals who failed to heed the message, particularly if those individuals are known to others in attendance at the meetings, can be a powerful way to deliver the deterrence message.

Equally important as the credibility of the law enforcement threat is the ability to follow through on the offer of services. If service programs do not respond to targeted individuals when they request assistance, then the strategy is in jeopardy. In many communities, such as Los Angeles and Boston, these programs have developed local community support because they are viewed as balancing the need for

trict of North Carolina. The interviews conducted in the Indianapolis jail suggested that the group structure of offenders did help communicate the PSN message as many individuals in the jail who had not attended an offender notification meeting, were well aware of the PSN message.<sup>15</sup> Similar findings are reported by the research partner from the Southern District of Alabama.<sup>16</sup>

### **Follow-Up Offender Notification Meetings**

The Southern District of Indiana has experimented with two types of follow-up meetings. The first type of meeting is a positive, community-based meeting that occurs when a group of offenders or a specific neighborhood has had no continued gun violence following the initial offender notification meeting. These meetings occur in a community setting, and family and community members are invited. The message conveyed is one of appreciation for the calm the neighborhood has experienced. The available services and support message is again expressed and often times community members who have experienced personal success (quit using drugs, found a job, etc.) give personal testimonies. In many respects, this meeting serves as positive reinforcement, but also a reminder that both the law enforcement officials and the service providers remain committed to reducing gun violence.

The second type of meeting is quite different. This occurs when the gun violence associated with either a particular group or neighborhood contin-

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enforcement with positive forms of intervention. It is critical for the offers of assistance to be realizable, otherwise neighborhood residents will withdraw support and the entire strategy may collapse.

There are many reasons why services that have been offered may not be delivered. In some communities, the programs participating in the offender notification program may have all their slots filled at the time. For example, if a substance abuse program offers help, but when the offender attempts to participate in the program he or she is told that they will have to wait until a slot opens up, the offender may feel that the program has reneged on a commitment.<sup>17</sup> It is essential for those high-risk offenders who have attended the meeting to see that all service programs involved are making every effort to deliver services to them.

## **Connections to Other Strategies**

Offender notification meetings can only be successful as part of a more comprehensive effort to combat gun violence. The notification is only successful if it is targeted at high-risk individuals and communicates a specific deterrence message that will be followed through on for those individuals and groups who continue to commit gun violence. The identification of high-risk offenders can be done in conjunction with an MVP-type list of high-risk firearm offenders in a community. Additionally, strategies such as homicide incident reviews can help to identify the high-risk individuals who should be targeted in subsequent offender notification meetings. Incident reviews may identify individuals who continually appear in gun offense reports as witnesses, victims, acquaintances, or someone on the scene. These individuals may be very appropriate for involvement in future notification meetings.

## **Assessment of Outcomes**

As with many of the strategies that have been implemented as part of PSN, the implementation of offender notification meetings in most jurisdictions is relatively recent and thus has not yet been rigorously evaluated. Of those programs that have been in place for a longer period of time and where offender notification meetings were used as part of a comprehensive approach, Boston and Indianapolis have had some promising results.

In Boston, a more systematic evaluation of Operation Ceasefire that included offender notification meetings as one of its core strategies found that the program was associated with statistically significant reductions in the number of youth homicides citywide, the number of “shots fired” calls citywide, the overall number of gun assaults citywide, and the number of gun assaults by youths in the target district.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the city experienced a period of two and one-half years where there was not a single youth homicide. As the authors note, the role of the offender notification meetings, absent other strategies, cannot be determined, but the evaluation documented reductions in gun violence that were associated with Boston's more comprehensive firearm reduction program.

In Indianapolis, researchers approached their evaluation in a novel way. They conducted surveys of arrestees to determine if persons involved with the criminal justice system were aware of the gun violence reduction program and if this awareness was associated with an increased perception that future gun violence would result in sanctions by the criminal justice system. These surveys indicated that many more arrestees had heard about their comprehensive firearm violence reduction program than had attended any of the offender notification meetings. In addition, these surveys also indicated that those individuals who had attended a notification meeting believed they were more likely to be sanctioned by the criminal justice system than arrestees that had not attended the meetings. In addition, similar to the research in Boston, they found significant reductions in homicide, although it was impossible to directly attribute the decline to offender notification meetings.<sup>19</sup>

More recently, PSN research partners in the Middle District of North Carolina and the Northern District of Illinois (Chicago) have been tracking the probationers and parolees who have attended offender notification meetings. Although the results are preliminary, notification-meeting attendees exhibited very low rates of re-offending. Additionally, the PSN research partner in the Southern District of Indiana is conducting the first systematic experiment evaluating the effects of offender notification meetings.<sup>20</sup> Findings from all these studies will be very informative to both the PSN initiative and research communities.<sup>21</sup>

ues. Here, the offenders in the original meeting will receive home visits from police-probation-parole teams during which they will typically be subject to a drug test. At the meeting, the Assistant U.S. Attorney will explain the reason that they have been ordered back into court is because of the continued violence. Examples of individuals who have been arrested or the victim of violence will be provided. Then the meeting will conclude with dismissal of a portion of the group and the arrest of those individuals accused of probation or parole violation (e.g., positive drug test) or a new offense. The goal is to clearly reinforce the promise of the original notification meeting that continued gun violence will result in application of all available sanctions.

## Keys to Successful Implementation

- Identifying the right partners is critical. All partners must be committed to the success of the program and be willing to occasionally put aside organizational needs for the good of the comprehensive effort.
- The approach must be balanced between the law enforcement message of targeted enforcement and the willingness to provide services to support offenders who want to turn their lives around.
- The offender notification meeting must be targeted on high-risk individuals—those individuals in a community who have engaged in or are likely to engage in gun violence.
- The partners in the meetings must be willing and able to follow through on both the threats and the promises. Increased prose-

cution and transitional services must both be available and likely outcomes.

- The notification should be broader than just at the meetings. A broad-based approach to communicating the message of this new strategy appears necessary to have successful outcomes.

## How Has Business Changed?

In communities that have implemented offender notification meetings, the general “ways of doing business” have changed in a number of important ways. First, there is significantly increased communication between all law enforcement partners in the program, as well as increased communications between law enforcement and the service providers in a community. The regular meetings result in stronger relationships that can be called upon for future implementation issues or concerns.

This increased communication also results in new ways for law enforcement to coordinate operations. In many communities with offender notification meetings, probation and police officers develop new ways to work together. The role of the U.S. Attorney’s Office is important because, in some communities, this is the first ongoing relationship between the U.S. Attorney and local criminal justice officials.

One additional area where operations have changed in communities is that law enforcement officials know more about the services provided by agencies. This has led to more direct referrals and additional communication between law enforcement and the agencies attempting to work with high-risk individuals. Finally, offender notification meetings have proven to be an important vehicle for bringing the community into the PSN partnership. Many community members appreciate the efforts of the U.S. Attorney’s Office, local prosecutors, law enforcement, and other local agencies to not only respond aggressively to gun violence, but also to try and prevent high-risk individuals from becoming further involved in gun violence. In turn, the involvement of the community brings an additional sense of fairness and legitimacy to the meetings and to associated enforcement strategies, as well as links to offender services.

**Figure 1: Offender Notification Meetings—Lessons Learned****Successful offender notification meetings are built on:**

- Leadership from the U.S. Attorney.
- Involvement of key criminal justice agencies, service providers, and the community.
- Credible threats of federal and local sanctions for gun crime.
- Focused deterrence through direct communication to individuals at high risk for gun crime.
- Additional communication of deterrence message through probation/parole, streetworkers, community leaders, and a media campaign.
- Balanced message of sanctions and support.
- Follow-through on enforcement and sanctions threat.
- Follow-through on support and services.
- Involvement of research partner to assess offender notification meeting implementation and impact and to provide feedback to PSN task force.

### **Offender Re-entry Notification Meetings**

A growing number of PSN task forces have begun to implement notification meetings in their local jails or prisons for those inmates who will be returning to their neighborhoods. Essentially, the purpose of re-entry offender notification meetings is the same as offender notification meetings that take place in the community. The goal is to target a specific group of returning offenders and communicate the message that continued violence will not be tolerated. Additionally, these re-entry meetings make a point of trying to educate soon to be ex-inmates about the existing federal gun laws and the fact that, as convicted felons, they are not allowed to own or possess guns or ammunition.

In the Eastern District of Arkansas (ED AR), PSN task force members take part in quarterly offender notification meetings in the Department of Corrections (DOC). The DOC selects who will attend the meetings that take place as part of the pre-release process. The first half of the meeting involves the “carrot” portion of the message, where the offenders are told about available housing, treatment and support. Potential employers attend the pre-release conference and try to help with the employment needs of the offenders. The second half of the meeting involves the “stick” portion of the message, where representatives from the U.S. Attorney’s Office (USAO), local law enforcement, probation, parole, and the prosecutor’s office all speak to the offenders about the choices they face as they are released from confinement. Sanctions are specifically explained. The ED AR task force began by targeting violent felons but is now expanding the approach to include sex offenders as well.

In the Southern District of Georgia, the re-entry effort involves speaking to groups of offenders who are about to be paroled from the Georgia Department of Corrections through what is known as the transitional center. Select ex-offenders complete their incarceration in the “transitional center,” where they are addressed by the PSN Coordinator and the Law Enforcement Coordinating Committee (LECC) as part of a parole orientation meeting. They emphasize the stiff penalties gun crime recidivists face in federal court and the fact that the federal system offers no parole. They also emphasize the hope that the ex-offenders will use the information to motivate themselves to stay out of trouble so that they can stay in the community. All offenders exiting the Georgia Department of Corrections on parole receive the message. The PSN officials have spoken to over 1,000 offenders released through the transitional center over the last several years and report that only two have been arrested subsequently for gun crimes.

In the Northern District of Alabama (ND AL), the USAO is taking on the difficult task of trying to reach all returning offenders from state and local facilities. The PSN task force created a video that includes interviews with the U.S. Attorney, the Alabama Attorney General, a local law enforcement officer, three federal inmates currently incarcerated, and the Special Agent in Charge for Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). The video also includes slides and a voice over. In cooperation with the Department of Corrections and the Middle and Southern Districts of Alabama, the video was distributed to the 26 state correctional institutions and has been incorporated into the release protocol for every inmate released each month. Further, this video has been distributed to all of the local district

attorneys across the state of Alabama for display in the local city and county jails or through the local probation department. The NDAL message advises that federal prosecutors will pursue federal prosecution if the ex-offenders are caught with a gun, no matter the circumstances. In federal court, gun crime offenders are going to serve significant sentences. The video notes that PSN is a nation-wide program, so gun offenders need to be aware that if they are caught with a gun, they can be prosecuted in federal court.

In the Middle District of North Carolina, Durham County has established the Re-entry Partnership Program for individuals returning to Durham County from North Carolina prisons. The PSN Task Force reached out and partnered with this existing program. It is a collaborative effort among local law enforcement, human services, and community organizations. Clients are selected through an application and interview process. If selected, upon release, offenders are picked up by team members and transported to the approved home plan. Clients then become part of a three-phase plan where they are closely monitored and given access to services including education, employment assistance, substance abuse treatment, vocational training, life-skills classes, housing alternatives, and referrals. They try to provide these services at no cost to the client. Once clients have completed all three phases, they are placed in a voluntary aftercare program. Clients can return for aftercare for as long as they desire.

Similarly, in the Middle District of North Carolina, the city of Winston-Salem established a re-entry initiative in response to requests for community resources by ex-offenders. They now have a Community Re-entry Coalition of 17 agencies that address re-entry issues and have created a single “port of entry” for services. Through the PSN task force and their partnership with Weed and Seed, program coordinators identify returning offenders and reach out to them through notification meetings. In addition, they have piloted a project in one of the local correctional facilities. Program coordinators started with a group that meets one day per week for 12 weeks inside the pilot site. Community resource providers go to the facility to help match soon-to-be released inmates with needed services. The inmates are recognized for being in the group but receive no sentence reduction. The Middle District of North Carolina has also created a video that is shown to ex-offenders. The video describes potential sanctions for felons in possession of a firearm, as well as services available upon release to the community.

The research on re-entry notification meetings is limited. As part of the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative program, researchers in Indianapolis followed a group of released inmates that attended a meeting shortly after being released from prison and compared them to similar former inmates who had not attended a meeting.<sup>22</sup> They found that inmates not attending the meetings tended to be arrested much sooner than were those who attended meetings, but the findings were not statistically significant and were limited by a small sample size. The researchers concluded that the meetings might have greater impact if conducted prior to release from the correctional facility. Further, the interviews and observations of these meetings also led to the recommendation that PSN task force members keep in mind that offenders who “have done their time” seem to be open to the information about potential federal sanctions for gun crime and to the opportunities for services and support, but do not want to be “threatened” with new sanctions.





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## Endnotes

1. Bureau of Justice Statistics: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjc/cvict\\_c.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjc/cvict_c.htm) (as of 12/28/04).

2. Levels of property crime and violent crime not involving a gun are lower in the United States than many other western democracies, but gun crime remains exceptionally high in the U.S. See Zimring and Hawkins, 1999; Bureau of Justice Statistics: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/ijs.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/ijs.htm) (as of 12/28/04).

3. Reviews of promising gun crime reduction strategies that can assist research partners and task forces include Braga, 2004; National Research Council, 2005; Ludwig and Cook, 2003; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999. See also Dalton, 2003; Decker, 2003.

4. These data were reported by the U.S. Department of Justice, Executive Office for United States Attorneys (10/05).

5. Data compiled by Professor Joe Trotter and colleagues as part of American University's PSN Technical Assistance Program.

6. Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2004. See also [www.psn.gov](http://www.psn.gov).

7. Readers interested in a more detail about the background and strategic problem-solving model of PSN are referred to Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2004; [www.psn.gov](http://www.psn.gov); and McGarrell, 2005.

8. Various PSN task forces use different labels for offender notification meetings. These include lever pulling meetings, ceasefire meetings, call-in meetings, and likely others.

9. See Braga et al., 2001; McDevitt et al. 2003.

10. McGarrell and Chermak, 2003; McGarrell and Chermak, 2004; Chermak and McGarrell, 2004.

11. Tita et al, 2005.

12. Nightlite refers to programs whereby probation and parole officers, accompanied by police officers, conduct visits to the homes of high-risk probationers and parolees. The visits provide a check on curfew or house arrest compliance, and can include a drug test and even a search of the premises in certain circumstances. They also communicate a deterrence message and can reinforce the theme of the offender notification meeting of increased law enforcement attention and linkage to services.

13. Photos taken from the "federal system of records" may pose Privacy Act concerns. PSN officials are advised to consult with their

Firearms Enforcement Assistance Team point-of-contact if considering the use of materials contained in any federal system of records.

14. Kennedy, 1998.

15. McGarrell and Chermak, 2004.

16. Communication with Professor Tim O'Shea from the University of South Alabama, research partner for the PSN Task Force in the Southern District of Alabama.

17. Evidence increasingly suggests that the perception of being treated unfairly and disrespectfully is an important predictor of future re-offending. See Tyler, 1990; Tyler and Huo, 2001; Sherman, 1993.

18. Braga et al., 2001.

19. See endnote 3.

20. Professor Steve Chermak from Indiana University is working with PSN officials to compare two types of meetings: one emphasizing a law enforcement focus and one with a stronger community support focus. Both types of meetings are compared with a control group that did not attend a notification meeting.

21. These preliminary findings are reported from James Frabutt, University of North Carolina at Greensboro; Andrew Papachristos and Tracey Meares from the University of Chicago; and Steven Chermak, Indiana University.

22. McGarrell, Hipple, and Banks (2003).