

Law Enforcement
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Project Safe Neighborhoods



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Focused Deterrence Strategies for Violence Reduction

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Davis Shelfer, M.A., SHSU

Christi L. Gullion, Ph.D., SHSU

This report highlights key findings from a systematic review of Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) evaluations. We describe PSN, define the “focused deterrence” framework of PSN, identify promising strategies for violence reduction based on that framework, and describe common elements of successful inter-agency task forces. Law enforcement agencies can use the lessons learned from this project to efficiently direct resources to specific, persistent violence and forge productive relationships between stakeholders, such as local, state, and federal agencies and relevant community partners.

Background

Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) is a nation-wide initiative, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice since 2001, to reduce local violent crime problems through inter-agency cooperation. PSN task forces tailor violence reduction strategies to the unique nature of each neighborhood's crime problem and community context. Thus, PSN initiatives vary across locations. Every PSN task force is administered by U.S. Attorneys' Offices, that leverage federal sanctions and prosecutorial resources to ensure swift, certain,

severe sanctions for people responsible for driving local violence. These task forces include local, state, federal, and tribal police agencies, prosecutors, community stakeholders, and research partners. Since PSN work has been consistently funded for over twenty years, researchers have produced dozens of studies on the design and effectiveness of PSN programs. This body of knowledge can be leveraged to improve PSN initiatives.

PSN is built on a “focused deterrence” framework. Under this framework, criminal justice agencies study, develop, and apply deterrent strategies to repeat offenders, gang captains, and other lynchpin actors who are largely responsible for a neighborhood's violence problem. One way to implement focused deterrence is with a “pulling levers” strategy. Pulling levers entails using every available legal resource, such as federal “felon in possession of a firearm” charges, to better deter potential re-offenders. Theoretically, pulling levers creates a better deterrent through the increased certainty and severity of punishment from a federal class-D felony charge. For more information on “pulling levers,” see Kennedy (1997).

In contrast, a more traditional general deterrence approach is less focused and, for instance, might involve

enhanced punishments for *all* defendants. Police research shows focused approaches are more likely to produce crime and problem reductions. The focused deterrence approach used by PSN emphasizes doing homework beforehand, planning, collaborating, and sharing data between agencies so the crime problem can be targeted without stretching departmental budgets.

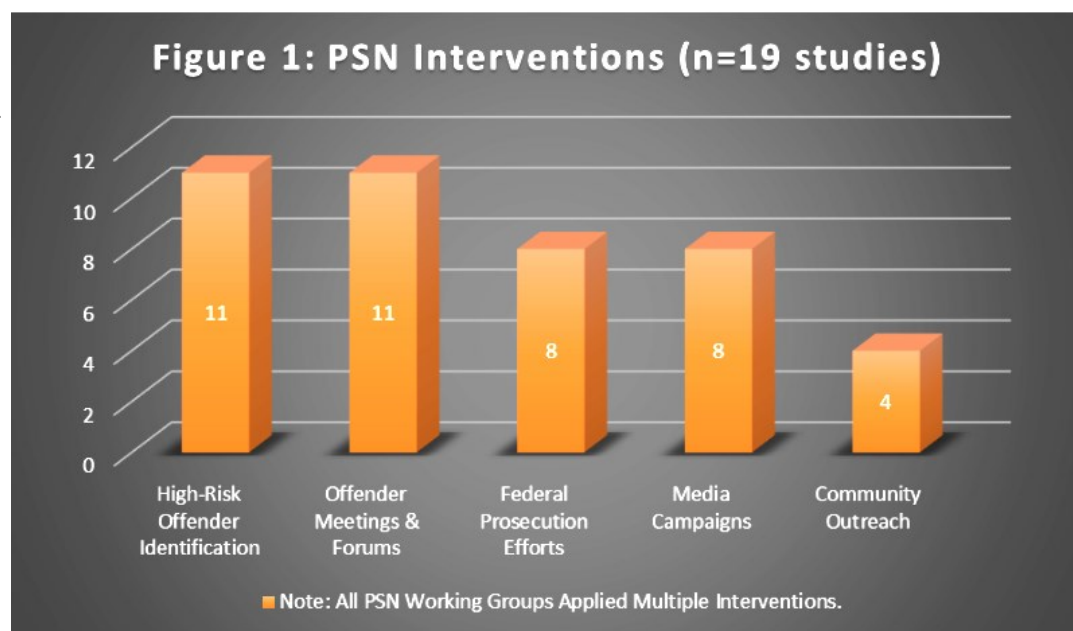
Methods

This report is based on a systematic review of PSN evaluation research. We searched government and research websites and nine online databases to find all relevant, publicly accessible studies of PSN. Our initial search produced 8,248 abstracts and studies; our first screening process reduced that number to 2,930, and 98 studies met our inclusion criteria. We identified PSN program evaluations that were led by independent researchers who analyzed empirical data. Twenty-two of the 98 studies were sufficiently rigorous for a complete review; these studies form the basis of our results and discussion sections and are available upon request. We review findings from 19 of those 22 studies in this report; three were excluded because the PSN intervention did not target neighborhood-level violent crime. We coded each of the 19 studies based on scientific rigor, the crime target of each intervention, the interventions used, and the effectiveness.

Key Findings

PSN Violence Prevention Interventions

All PSN working groups involved in the 19 studies applied multiple interventions and many targeted multiple categories of crime (see Figure 1). Collaborative case reviews were frequently conducted, allowing PSN stakeholders to identify high-risk offenders (57.9%) and conduct offender notification meetings and forums (57.9%). Enhanced federal prosecution efforts were frequently employed (42.1%), increasing deterrence and incapacitating more people for longer periods of time. Pro-social community groups (e.g., faith-based organizations, social services, schools) were integrated into approximately 21% of the PSN



interventions. Media campaigns advertising federal, legal penalties for gun violence, drug crime, and gang involvement also appeared in many (42.1%) of reviewed studies. Several PSN programs employed enhanced law enforcement street presence and increased supervision of probationers or parolees.

PSN Effectiveness in Reducing Violence

Most (63.6%) PSN evaluations used gun crime as an outcome of interest. Some studies measured gun crime with shots-fired calls for service data while others used fatal and non-fatal shooting incident counts.

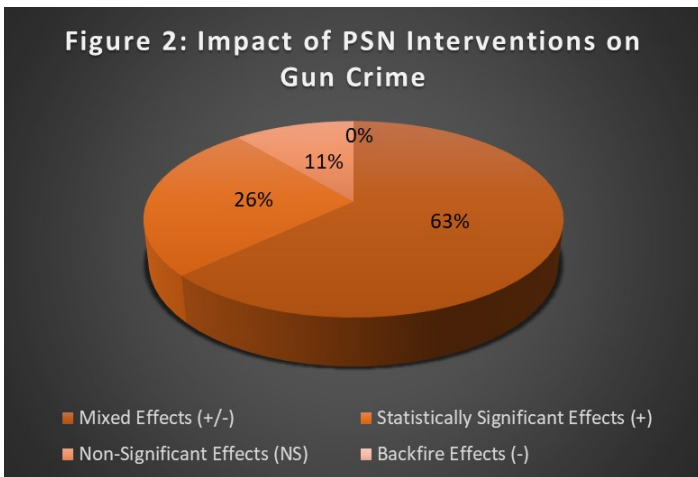
We strictly applied the “mixed” standard. For example, if an intervention reduced three of four crime targets and did not affect the fourth, we determined the intervention showed “mixed” results.

Discussion

Cooperation in Interagency Settings

Many of the evaluation studies outlined successful strategies for achieving interagency cooperation to best address gun and gang violence with PSN interventions. The PSN initiative integrates five key components within interagency settings to achieve cooperation and ensure the best approach to reducing gun and gang crime is taken (see Figure 3). These five components include: partnerships, strategic planning, training, outreach, and accountability (e.g., Decker, 2007; McDevitt et al., 2007; McGarrell et al., 2013).

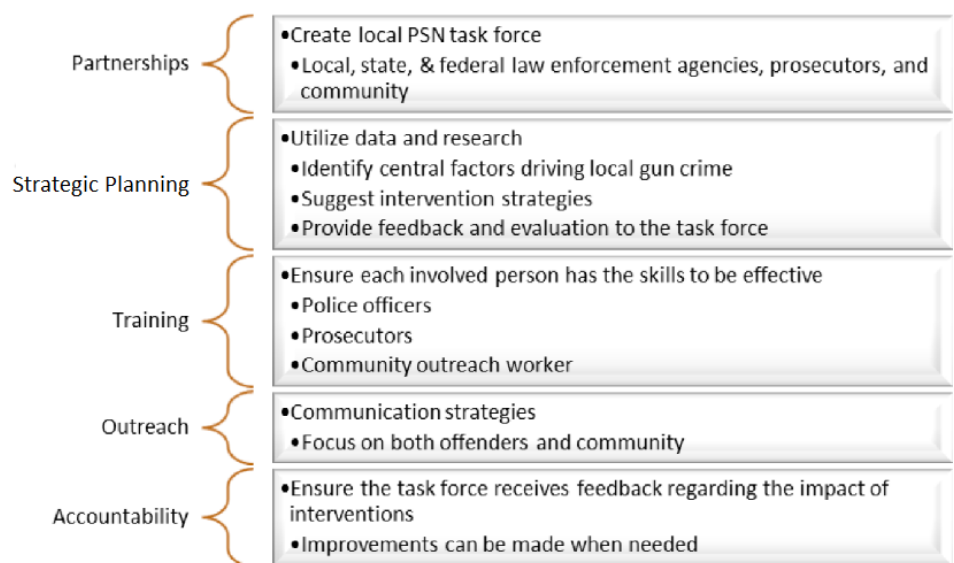
Figure 2: Impact of PSN Interventions on Gun Crime



Nine (40.9%) studies analyzed violent crimes more broadly. Some studies measured overall rates of violent crime; others examined specific forms of interpersonal violence, such as robbery and assault.

Evaluations found mixed but encouraging results. Specifically, of these 19 studies, 12 (63.2%) found a combination of mixed effects on crime outcomes (see Figure 2). Mixed effects mean that the study found reductions on many, though not all, crime outcomes. Five (26.3%) found that PSN initiatives reduced all measured crime targets, and two (11.0%) found no effects of the interventions on all outcomes. None of these studies uncovered statistically significant “backfire” effects.

Figure 3: Five Key Components of Interagency Cooperation



Focused Deterrence Interventions

Accurately identifying key players in the neighborhood-level crime problem is essential. High-risk offender identification should begin at the front-end of any focused deterrence-based violence reduction strategy. Stakeholders must conduct thorough case reviews, map offenses to determine hot spots and hot corridors, and triangulate potential key players by reviewing multiple data sources.

For example, if a municipal police department does not know much about a certain offender, the county sheriff's office might. Parole and probation data, prison records, and restraining order databases can help narrow the list of high-risk offenders. Relying on a single source of data may be insufficient – in this process, the value of strong collaborative relationships and data-sharing cannot be understated (see, for example, PSN Case Study 3 (Klofas & Hipple, 2006) and a strategy used in Los Angeles' LASER program (Fox et al., 2021; Uchida & Swatt, 2013)).

Once high-risk offenders are identified, the “focused” part of focused deterrence is now possible. Many PSN programs activate “retail deterrence” components at this point, using posters, billboards, and word-of-mouth to communicate deterrent messages in hot spots and hot corridors. A common strategy for PSN task forces is to invite high-risk offenders to meetings and forums. In these meetings and forums, the task force clearly and unequivocally communicates to these key players that the neighborhood violence issue is under the microscope.

Core strategies commonly used by PSN task forces include:

Approach: Capitalize on knowledge and resources

- Be strong and unified
- Be well-informed and one step ahead
- Be adaptable to the community context
- Be willing and able to use federal attorneys, prosecutors, and sanctions

Partnerships: Incorporate community pillars

- Religious leaders
- School system employees
- Local business leaders
- Community activists
- Victim advocates

Communication: Convey to offenders

- Violence reduction is a top priority
- Offenders have been meticulously studied
- Federal, state, and local resources will be used to make the neighborhoods safe

And present to offenders:

- Evidence compiled against them
- Data collected on the issue
- All potential legal sanctions (“pulling levers in practice”)

The advantage of this focused deterrence approach is the ability to reduce crime efficiently without making large expenditures for new equipment, more personnel and overtime, or creating state-level penalties for that could place greater burdens on the correctional system.

More information

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For further information, please contact:

Davis Shelfer, dgs026@shsu.edu, SHSU