

Promising Strategies for Reducing Gun Violence

Report to Indiana Project Safe Neighborhoods

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Executive Summary

The goal of this report is to suggest new or promising approaches for reducing violent crime and gun crime within Marion County. It is based on existing academic research, PSN activities locally and nationwide, recent news stories, and the 1998 strategic plan developed by the Indianapolis Violence Reduction Partnership (IVRP). A brief summary of potential tactics and strategies is listed below:

Existing or previously used programs

- Re-visiting and re-establishing components of the 1998 IVRP strategic plan, including:
 - More frequent lever pulling and other offender notification meetings.
 - A secure IVRP/PSN website to host various lists, intelligence briefings, and other relevant/useful data bases.
 - Re-invigoration of regular violent crime incident review meetings held in IMPD districts.
- Continued and more intensive use of local gun crime prevention programs for juveniles (e.g., *Choices*, *EKG*, and other yet-to-be-designed programs).
- Additional youth mentoring programs (e.g., AIM).
- Re-entry support efforts (such as those likely to be commissioned by the CAGI grant).

Unproven or undeveloped programs

- Anonymous crime tip phone and text message systems.
- Consent (parental and voluntary) searches for illegal weapons.
- Efforts to educate legitimate owners on protecting their firearms.
- Provision of gun locks and educational materials on the need to protect firearms.
- Programs tailored to risk factors associated with gun crime offenders.
- Closer examination of the criminal histories of gun crime offenders.
- Analysis of “near repeat patterns” (of gun and violent crime) in Indianapolis neighborhoods.
- More public health approaches to violence reduction (e.g., use of “violence interrupters” to intervene in gun-related and gang violence).
- Emergency room interventions in cases of aggravated assault.
- Partnerships with area pediatricians/social workers for distribution of gun safety information, gun locks, educational materials, etc.
- Increased surveillance for illegal firearms by non-law enforcement public service professionals.





Introduction

This report introduces several promising and innovative (some untested) strategies for reducing gun violence in Indianapolis, in support of the Indiana Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative.¹ The Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) program was established in May 2001. PSN is “a comprehensive, strategic approach to reducing gun crime in America...linking together federal, state, and local law enforcement, prosecutors, and community leaders.”² Elements of the Indianapolis PSN project began in 1998 in the form of earlier initiatives such as the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative (SACSI) and the Indianapolis Violence Reduction Partnership (IVRP).³ Indiana Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) is housed in the United States Attorney’s office for the Southern District of Indiana and focuses on multi-faceted approaches to reducing gun crime.

To develop promising gun violence reduction strategies, several sources were consulted, including existing academic research on the nature of gun violence and effectiveness of gun violence reduction strategies, existing documentation of local PSN activities and other PSNs nationwide, as well as recent news stories from The Criminal Justice Journalists’ News Center.⁴ We begin by reviewing gun-crime reduction strategies used in Indianapolis in recent years.

¹ Although the PSN initiative also focuses on reducing gang violence, exploring strategies to reduce gang violence is beyond the scope of the current report.

² “Executive Summary,” (no date), *Project Safe Neighborhoods: Making America’s Communities Safer*. Accessed at <http://www.psn.gov/about/execsumm.html#strategic>, November 13, 2007.

³ E. F. McGarrell and S. Chermak. 2003. “Strategic Approaches to Reducing Firearms Violence: Final Report on the Indianapolis Violence Reduction Partnership,” Final Report Submitted to the National Institute of Justice, Grant #1999-7114-IN-IJ and #1999-7119-IN-IJ. January. In addition, personal interview with Jason Hutchens, July 8-11, 2008.

⁴ (see <http://cjj.mn-8.net/default.asp?link=>)





Existing or Previously Used Strategies/Tactics

Indianapolis Violence Reduction Partnership

Since its inception, the Indianapolis PSN project has worked closely with the Indianapolis Violence Reduction Partnership (IVRP), which was established in December 1997 and served as the primary focal point of efforts to reduce Indianapolis homicides and curb violence within the city. In 1998, through the IVRP, a strategic plan, titled “Reducing Violence in Indianapolis: Strategic Plan (May 8, 1998)” (1998 IVRP SP), was developed to reduce violence in Indianapolis. Because ten years has passed since the adoption of this plan, it would make sense to re-visit, and to a large extent, re-commit to the major principles and elements of the 1998 IVRP SP. The plan detailed several key principles:

- Incapacitation of serious and chronic violent offenders
- Reduction in illegal firearms possession and carrying
- Specific deterrence of potential violent offenders
- Reaffirming and communicating a set of norms and values that violence is unacceptable
- Development, coordination, and communication of legitimate opportunities for potential offenders

The plan listed several elements, including:

- Increased arrest, prosecution, and incarceration of the most serious violent offenders
- Disruption of illegal firearms markets
- Multiple-level and multiple agency strategic response to homicides
- Communication of anti-violence message to potential offenders and the community
- Development of community-based prevention components.

The 1998 IVRP strategic plan still provides useful suggestions for violence reduction tactics in 2008. The plan described specific activities to reduce violence, focused mainly on law enforcement and prosecution activities. This included efforts such as directed patrols, warrant sweeps, regularized homicide and serious aggravated assault incident reviews, “hot spots” policing, offender notification meetings, targeting lists of high risk individuals, lever pulling sessions, and federal prosecution of gun crimes.⁵

While it is generally accurate to note that most of these efforts have become more or less standard practice in Indianapolis, it is also fair to note that the frequency and intensity of individual efforts have varied considerably. For example, Chermak and McGarrell (2004, p. 168) noted that “more than 30 [lever pulling] meetings occurred in Indianapolis starting in the fall of 1998.” In 2004 there were more than 11 such meetings. Through July, there has been one in 2008. More frequent lever pulling and other types of offender notification meetings might therefore be another promising tactic to introduce in 2008.

In addition, consistent with other PSNs nationwide and the 1998 IVRP SP, lists of extremely dangerous individuals (e.g., VIPER list) have been made available to IMPD officers via their mobile data terminals (MDT) so that they would have this information when dealing with potential suspects. VIPER information is currently available in real time to line officers via their MDTs. However, a more recent list

⁵Such programs have also been the subject of several academic research studies, both nationally and locally (e.g. Braga and Pierce 2005; Braga et al. 2001, 2008; Chermak and McGarrell 2004; McGarrell et al. 2001, 2006; National Research Council 2005). For example, one study found that directed patrols focusing on seizing guns in traffic stops reduced gun crimes in Indianapolis, but noted that patrols that focused on stopping suspicious vehicles were more effective at producing gun seizures than increased vehicle stops for all traffic violations (McGarrell et al. 2001).



was developed in November 2007 containing individuals deemed the “Top 10” in each district. The Top 10 information is made available during roll calls in IMPD districts, but not electronically. This might suggest automating the Top 10 list information to enhance safety of officers and maximize the number of potential contact points with such individuals.

To take this idea further, one comparatively simple information sharing initiative would be to establish a secure (e.g., https/...) IVRP website that could serve as host for various lists, intelligence briefings, and other relevant and useful data bases. Such a website could also have non-secure areas containing information of value to other public agencies or citizens. A comprehensive IVRP website could provide a platform on which to build an effective information sharing framework useful in preventing and combating violent crime in Marion County.

Finally, regarding useful elements of the 1998 IVRP SP, another major component involved the use of regularized ‘incident reviews’ of homicides in each of the I(M)PD districts. These incident reviews collated information from a variety of data sources (police, prosecution, probation, parole, courts) to develop comprehensive intelligence about individuals who were committing or associating with those committing extremely violent crimes throughout the city. During the 1998 to 2004 period, incident review meetings were held regularly in the I(M)PD districts. A re-invigoration of these meetings, especially during periods in which violent crimes appear to be increasing, might prove to be another valuable tool in the PSN arsenal.

Non-Law Enforcement Strategies

The 1998 IVRP SP also lists a variety of objectives relating to community-based prevention efforts. The document lists fourteen action items, which included:

- Focused intervention with gang-associated youth
- Programs for children witnessing violence
- Supervised educational and recreational programs, particularly drop-in and afterschool
- Employment programs for at-risk youth
- Home-Nurse visitation programs for at-risk families

Although beyond the scope of this report to assess each of these action items, it is clear that some items have been initiated or supported, whereas many would benefit from renewed attention. For example, currently there are some local gun crime prevention programs for juveniles. One program called *Educating Kids About Gun Violence* (EKG), developed by the Marion County Prosecutor’s office, is designed to increase attendees’ knowledge about the legal sanctions associated with carrying or using a firearm, as well as the medical consequences that result from being shot. There is also a program called *Choices* designed to show how poor choices led to criminal activity and lengthy prison sentences for three young women. These programs are currently undergoing independent evaluation to determine the degree to which their messages impact attendees. Review of other PSNs across the country suggests that similar programs aimed at prevention of violence among youth exist nationwide. It is unclear how many of these programs have been shown to be effective in independent evaluations.

A potential difficulty with such programs is that they typically are one-time programs, which are probably less likely to lead to long-term changes in attitudes or behavior. Programs that are longer in duration are more expensive and much more difficult to develop and maintain, but might have more lasting impact. Existing documentation from other PSN sites does not clarify whether other gun violence prevention programs aimed at youth are short or long-term in duration. PSN communications channels might be used to inquire about any long-term programs that have been implemented at other PSN sites nationally.



Consistent with the idea of developing longer lasting and better social relationships with pro-social contacts that could help reduce violence, several youth mentoring programs have been developed. The Aftercare in Indiana through Mentoring (AIM) program pairs teenagers exiting the Indiana juvenile correction system with a college student mentor. These mentoring relationships are designed to last approximately 12 months and have been shown to reduce recidivism and reoffending rates for teens across a variety of different categories and time periods (Jarjoura 2007). While not specifically tied to gun violence, there is a reasonable likelihood that some of these juvenile offenders engaged in gun carrying and gun violence prior to entering the DOC and would do so again upon release. Although more generally aimed at reducing recidivism for all kinds of crimes, mentoring programs such as AIM might be a worthwhile target for additional investment.

The 1998 IVRP SP plan refers to offenders on probation and parole in very limited ways. Research suggests that offenders with prior histories of violence are at high risk to re-offend within the first few years after release. In recent years, there have been some local efforts to deal proactively with this population and “lever pulling” meetings often focus on probationers and parolees. Such populations are appropriately targeted for additional law enforcement scrutiny. Yet, the 1998 IVRP SP says much less about broader issues of “re-entry” such as employment programs and substance abuse treatment which research suggests are key factors likely to increase the successful re-integration of offenders in society. Relying mainly on law enforcement approaches to deal with offenders has been shown to be less than optimal. Offenders with real social support, supported employment, and drug treatment are less likely to re-offend (e.g. Tita, Wilson, and MacDonald 2005). Unfortunately, many offenders are released with too few of the kinds of supportive services that would help them begin the path to successful re-integration into society. Concerted efforts in this area for violent offenders would be a sound investment for reducing gun violence. Moving re-entry support efforts forward is one major component of the 2008 Comprehensive Anti-Gang Initiative grant, so hopefully new re-entry projects will be developed soon.





Untested Approaches that Could be Considered

There are a variety of other comparatively untested approaches to violence reduction as well. News stories document that several cities have developed anonymous crime tip phone and text message programs to increase the information available to police in solving violent crimes. If such a program exists locally, consideration could be given to finding ways to increase the visibility and usage of the service. Such a program could also maximize the impact on gun violence by being tailored to anonymous tips on illegal guns.

Another program to reduce gun violence is consent searches for illegal weapons. Such programs are attempts to reduce the supply of illegal guns by trading amnesty from prosecution for the seizure of weapons (and any illegal drugs seized), especially for juveniles. St. Louis claimed some success with this program in reducing juvenile gun violence (Bilchik 1999). However, other cities such as Boston have met with public resistance to the program because of public perception that consent to search was sometimes obtained coercively. Washington, D.C., has attempted to reduce public resistance by making such searches by appointment only. If searches were at the request of concerned parents, they might be more positively received by the public. Such consent search programs might be fruitful because they are likely to get guns that would be carried by youths seeking to use them in crime or for self-protection (often resulting in gun crimes).

Research has shown that not all guns are equally likely to be used illegally (Stolzenberg and D'Alessio 2000). In particular, newer guns, especially semi-automatic handguns are more likely to be used in crimes (Sherman 2001). Therefore, programs that are targeted to the semi-automatic segment of the illegal firearm market might be more effective at reducing gun crime. One source of crime guns is theft from the homes of legitimate owners. One study found that 43 percent of stolen guns were taken in burglaries and another 26 percent were taken from vehicles (Stolzenberg and D'Alessio 2000). To reduce the supply of crime guns from this source, greater efforts could be made to educate legitimate owners on protecting their firearms. Other PSN sites have distributed gun locks and educational materials on the need to protect firearms from theft (*PSN in Practice II*, 2006). The PSN for the District of Alaska developed an educational campaign, "Not with my gun," for gun owners, which was combined with a self-recording gun identification mechanism so that stolen guns could be reported and tracked. The District of Colorado PSN distributed numerous gun locks as part of the Project ChildSafe Initiative.

Several PSNs nationwide reported programs aimed at educating children about the dangers of guns. To that end, one possible avenue of collaboration locally would be to team up with pediatricians. Because pediatricians see many children and their primary care-givers, they would seem an ideal source of information dissemination and would be able to reinforce the message from an early age that guns are dangerous. Parents may also feel less threatened when hearing such messages from doctors than the law enforcement community. Perhaps pediatricians could even be supplied with gun locks for distribution to gun-owning parents. Social workers could also be mobilized to spread this message and disseminate gun locks. Because poor, young, minority males are disproportionately likely to be homicide victims and offenders, it would seem desirable to target prevention efforts toward this group, which would suggest the need to carefully identify a population of doctors/pediatricians for participation in possible programs targeting this group before they get to a crime-prone age.

This illustrates the desirability of thinking in terms of developing programs tailored to risk factors for gun crime. Sherman (2001) notes that the majority of those arrested for gun crimes actually did *not* have prior felony convictions. However, those with two or more prior misdemeanor convictions on the day they legally purchased a firearm were 15 times more likely to subsequently be arrested for homicide, rape,



robbery, or aggravated assault than those with no criminal history. This suggests that focusing solely on barring felons from gun possession is not a fully effective approach. Therefore, closer examination of the criminal histories of gun crime offenders to develop more accurate profiles might be an effective component of anti-gun violence programs. If research can provide better evidence as to what criminal backgrounds or other individual characteristics are more likely to lead to gun crime, then programs can be targeted more effectively to those at greatest risk for gun crime.

One recent study also showed that in Philadelphia the areas near shootings had much higher likelihoods of additional shootings in the two week period following the first shooting, which could indicate the presence of retaliatory violence (Ratcliffe and Rengert 2008). Researchers could examine whether such “near repeat patterns” exist in Indianapolis and if so, this information could assist in the geographic and temporal deployment of police resources. This also illustrates the desirability of additional examination of the patterns of shootings.

A program that has received major media attention in recent months is the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention, which is characterized as a public health approach to violence reduction. One element of the program is the employment of “violence interrupters” to intervene in patterns of gun-related and gang violence. The violence interrupters are ex-felons released from Illinois corrections system, and trained in mediation. They reportedly use their tacit knowledge of Chicago gangs and street criminals to intervene in cases of aggravated assault and murder by contacting victims and members of the victim’s social networks to try to offset retaliatory or first strike incidents of serious personal violence. A preliminary evaluation by Northwestern University suggests the program—called Ceasefire—has had a measurable dampening effect on gang and gun violence.

Another approach to conflict resolution is emergency room (ER) interventions. Because many gunshot and stabbing victims receive treatment there, the ER seems a logical place to attempt interventions to reduce conflict and the potential for retaliation. Given that the majority of aggravated assaults occur between people who know each other, the likelihood of retaliation seems high in such cases. Interventions designed to mediate the conflicts that produced the gunshot or stabbing wounds might be effective because they would deal with victims at very high risk for seeking revenge.

In terms of gun seizures, there are public and private service entities that interact regularly with the general public. Meter readers, cable repair technicians, heating and ventilation contractors, plumbers, and pest controllers all regularly visit homes and could substantially increase surveillance for illegal guns. To ensure the safety of these individuals and increase their cooperation, they could be trained to observe signs of illegal gun, gang, or drug activity and report such activities anonymously.



Conclusion

The goal of this report is to suggest new or promising approaches for reducing gun crime. This task was difficult because Marion County currently engages in many activities deemed likely to reduce gun violence. Indianapolis has been the site of many innovative law enforcement practices shown to reduce gun crime. As noted earlier, re-visiting the 1998 IVRP SP to intensify the execution of some of its major components—more frequent offender notification meetings and lever pulling sessions, website/information sharing, and regularized incident reviews—is a promising tactic that can quickly build on PSN’s active history of successes in Marion County.

Because many of the programs used by PSN in past years have relied on traditional law enforcement approaches, a focus on more community-based solutions might also prove valuable. The traditional ‘carrot and stick’ approaches have often relied more on the threat of punishment than real assistance in employment, housing, or drug treatment, even though it is a truism in psychology that rewarding good behavior is more effective at achieving desired results than punishing bad behavior. This suggests it might be wise to seek implementation of more community-based violence prevention components that have received less attention in past years. Like PSN’s nationwide, the Indiana PSN does an exemplary job of documenting the number of arrests for gun crime. However, threats of additional prosecution are less effective in the long run without legitimate housing, employment, and drug treatment for would-be offenders. Efforts should also be expended toward developing prevention programs that have longer duration than the single-dose programs such as *EKG* and *Choices*. To that end, partnerships might also be developed with pediatricians and social workers because these groups have regular contact with at-risk populations and are perhaps less likely to engender the resistance that would accompany activities within the law enforcement community. These points of contact also tend to be ongoing and therefore might be more effective.

While many of these suggestions have not received rigorous independent verification—which means their likelihood of success is less certain—they can nonetheless be identified as potentially promising approaches for keeping the Indiana PSN at the forefront of violent and gun crime reduction.



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