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# Project Safe Neighborhoods: Strategic Interventions

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## Lowell, District of Massachusetts: Case Study 6

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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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# Executive Summary

## Context

Massachusetts is covered by a single U.S. Attorney's Office (USAO). The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that Massachusetts has just over 6.4 million residents (2003 estimate) and ranks 13<sup>th</sup> in U.S. state population (2000). The Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) task force in the District of Massachusetts focuses on Boston as well as 10 additional jurisdictions. This study focuses on the PSN task force operating in the City of Lowell.

## Task Force

The PSN task force in Lowell benefited from and built upon the USAO's experience with the Boston Operation Ceasefire Program as well as Lowell Police Department's (LPD's) longstanding commitment to community policing and problem solving. The police department is decentralized, with officers assigned to one of three geographic districts. The community-policing model emphasizes partnerships with community groups and other law enforcement agencies. These partnerships facilitated the implementation of PSN. The PSN working group consists of the PSN Coordinator and federal prosecutors from the USAO; local law enforcement including LPD detectives; federal law enforcement including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF); county prosecutors; probation officers; and research partners from Harvard and Northeastern Universities.

## Problem Analysis

In 2003, Lowell had a violent crime rate of 825 per 100,000 residents and a property crime rate of 2,933, based on the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports' (UCR) *Crime in the United States* (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). Compared to all U.S. cities with populations greater than 75,000, Lowell placed above average in terms of violent crime and below average in terms of property crime. From 2000 to 2004, Lowell had a relatively stable average homicide rate of 4.5 per year. Gun crime in Lowell involved young males with prior criminal histories and gang involvement.

## Strategies

The PSN strategy included an incapacitation strategy focused on a relatively small number of the most serious, chronic offenders of the federal criminal gun statute as well as a focused deterrence strategy geared toward youth gang members. The incapacitation strategy was facilitated by a joint prosecution gun case screening process whereby federal and local prosecutors reviewed cases to ensure that the most

serious chronic offenders received the longest sentence in either federal or state court. The focused deterrence strategy was based on direct communication to at-risk youth gang members through offender notification meetings, increased supervision of probationers, and focused police patrol. A particularly innovative strategy targeted adults from the Asian community believed to be involved in gambling operations to exert informal social control over Asian youth gangs to desist in gun crime.

### **Outcomes**

The impact assessment suggests a reduction in aggravated assaults with a firearm, the principal focus of the PSN Lowell task force. The reduction (-28 percent) was considerably larger than that observed in several comparison Massachusetts cities. There was no reduction in armed robberies with a gun or in gun-related calls-for-service. Homicides were too infrequent to assess impact. The assessment also indicated that a multi-agency partnership, employing a research-driven, strategic problem-solving approach, was effectively implemented in PSN Lowell.



## Lowell, District of Massachusetts

This case study describes and assesses the implementation of Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) in the District of Massachusetts and particularly in the City of Lowell. It also describes the problem analysis process, the strategic intervention implemented by the interagency task force or working group, and its impact on gun crime in Lowell. The study presents a detailed description of a unique approach to reducing firearm violence undertaken in Lowell, which involved implementing strong, creative, and effective partnerships among local and federal law enforcement agencies, the strategic use of data to define the problem, and the development of an innovative strategy to reduce the city's firearm violence problem. The experience of Lowell—a city whose size, demographics, and gun crime problems are similar to numerous mid-sized, urban communities throughout America—should benefit other agencies working within PSN networks or other interagency partnerships.

### Site Description

#### U.S. District of Massachusetts

The U.S. District of Massachusetts comprises the entire state. Massachusetts is a state of approximately 6.35 million people, with the City of Boston its political capital and economic center.

Massachusetts has a modest amount of gun violence compared to other states. In 2003, there were 140 murders statewide, just over half (73) of which were committed with a firearm. These 73 reported firearm homicides place Massachusetts in the bottom quartile among states.<sup>7</sup> Based on data provided by 291 Massachusetts crime reporting agencies, 29.2 percent of all reported robberies and 9.4 percent of all aggravated assaults were committed with a firearm. Virtually all of the state's gun crimes occur in Boston and 10 other smaller cities within the state (e.g., Brockton, Fall River, Lawrence, Lowell, Springfield, and Worcester). The PSN Coordinator at the U.S. Attorney's Office (USAO) encouraged each of these cities to join PSN efforts and form local task forces to deal with the particular firearm violence problem in their communities.

For several reasons, the PSN task force in Massachusetts gave greater initial emphasis to the smaller cities beyond Boston. First, the Boston Police Department—a department with a strategic orientation that is in part the model for PSN—appeared to have in place a greater

degree of resources, interagency and community partnerships, and analytical capability at its disposal than smaller urban departments. Second, during the early stages of PSN, Boston's gun violence problem seemed to be relatively under control: gun violence was near all-time lows, in part because of these strategic efforts. As such, it was believed that PSN resources were an opportunity to enhance the capacity of the smaller departments to understand their gun violence problem; participate in partnerships with federal, state, and local agencies; and craft strategic interventions that focused on their individual firearm violence problems. Among the agencies from these smaller cities that dealt regularly with gun crime problems is the Lowell Police Department (LPD). LPD, like other agencies, participated in the District of Massachusetts PSN task force, but also created a local interagency working group that focused attention on gun violence in Lowell.

### **City of Lowell**

Lowell is located in northeastern Massachusetts, and has a population of 105,167 (2000 U.S. Census). While its population is primarily White (62.5 percent), Lowell has a substantial minority population comprised of Asian (17.3 percent) and Hispanic (14.0 percent) people. African-Americans (3.5 percent) and residents that report other or multiple races (3.4 percent) make up the remaining racial and ethnic groups in Lowell. Roughly one in seven residents (14 percent) live below the poverty line, which is above average for Massachusetts cities and towns.

The racial composition of Lowell changed substantially between 1990 and 2000. Most notable has been the steady increase in the number of residents of Asian descent. This community has grown from 10.9 percent of Lowell's population in 1990 to 16.5 percent in 2000. This group is largely composed of people from or having ancestry in the Southeast Asian countries of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

The language and cultural barriers associated with these growing immigrant populations have been a challenge to the LPD. While Lowell officers report that it has been difficult to engage the Southeast Asian community, progress has been made over the last several years, with renewed emphasis on community policing and direct outreach to these communities.

Lowell had a violent crime rate of 825 per 100,000 residents, and property crime rate of 2,933 in 2003, based on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) Uniform Crime Reports' (UCR) *Crime in the United States* (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). Compared to all U.S. cities with populations greater than 75,000, Lowell places above average in violent crime and below average in property crime. From 2000 to 2004, Lowell had a relatively stable level of homicides averaging 4.5 per year.

## **Lowell Police Department**

LPD, consisting of 450 sworn police officers, has a national reputation for embracing community policing strategies. To facilitate ownership of neighborhoods and improve knowledge of localized crime issues, LPD patrol officers, supervisors, and detectives are assigned geographically to one of three sectors: East, West, or North. A captain is responsible for administering police services within each sector, and officers are allocated for long-term assignments. The department's neighborhood enforcement approach emphasizes interacting with community residents, addressing quality of life crimes, and engaging in partnerships with community groups.

The majority of the department's investigations are handled by decentralized detectives operating out of the sector stations, as well as a centralized unit assigned to the Investigative Services Division (ISD). The detectives from ISD were most closely involved in PSN. Within the centralized ISD, major crimes are handled by detectives from the Criminal Investigation Section, while detectives from the Special Investigation Section are responsible for vice-related crimes such as drug trafficking and illegal gaming. Personnel from both units played an important role in crafting and implementing PSN interventions.

## **PSN Development and Implementation**

Since the late 1980s, LPD has made a substantial change in its approach to policing, resulting in stronger relationships with external groups (Thatcher, 2000). Officers from each sector regularly attend neighborhood association meetings to discuss residents' public safety concerns. Such efforts are promoted and rewarded by the chief of police and management. As the department's community policing model grew, the department actively pursued partnerships with community-based organizations and law enforcement agencies. These partnerships would serve as a basis for the implementation of the city's PSN strategy.

A good example of the LPD's willingness to engage in partnerships was the Safety First initiative in the late 1990s. Safety First, a community initiative sponsored by a non-profit foundation, was a partnership of criminal justice agencies and community organizations modeled after the Boston Operation Ceasefire Program (Hartmann, 2002). Through the initiative, the department partnered with probation officers and local youth workers to craft enforcement responses to youth violence, such as "impact player" lists, home visits, and offender notification meetings.

The department also has built partnerships with federal law enforcement agencies. In some instances, this entails a daily working relationship and resource sharing. Through the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) for example, the department designates a full-

time detective to work at the FBI office in Lowell. This partnership entails working on investigations together and developing street intelligence. Another interagency partnership in which the LPD is involved is the Cross Border Initiative, in which LPD detectives work closely with the Drug Enforcement Administration and local jurisdictions in Massachusetts and New Hampshire to investigate interstate drug trafficking. These existing partnerships with federal agencies helped to build mutual trust between LPD personnel and federal agencies and formed the foundation upon which PSN was established.

In addition to developing partnerships, the department has built capacity to think strategically about crime problems—a core element of the PSN initiative. The department has made a commitment to research to help guide and assess policy and supports a crime analysis unit responsible for producing basic statistical reports, crime pattern and hot spot analysis, and special projects related to enforcement efforts. These analysts have developed a gang database that provides detailed information on gang members and associates. Detectives involved with violent crime have noted that the crime analysis unit is particularly helpful in providing information on patterns of crime as well as identifying likely suspects from databases.

### **PSN Lowell: Early Stages**

The partnerships that developed in Lowell through PSN began informally, but strengthened significantly during the national PSN conference in Virginia in 2002. This conference offered the opportunity for a group of the partners to spend time together and discuss how they could work to implement PSN in Lowell. LPD personnel and the PSN Coordinator for the U.S. Attorney's Office for Massachusetts met and began to lay the groundwork for PSN in Lowell. While there was already an interest in participating in this initiative by the leadership of the LPD, this conference provided an opportunity for a group of officers and the PSN Coordinator to meet and make more concrete plans for implementation.

### **PSN Task Forces**

PSN is designed to foster partnerships between various law enforcement agencies tackling similar gun violence problems. The partnership—and the cooperative enforcement and prosecution that ensued—was implemented in Lowell via an interagency working group or task force. The PSN Lowell working group focused specifically on the city's gun violence problems and interventions and consisted of local and federal law enforcement professionals and research partners from Harvard and Northeastern Universities. Local members of the task force included LPD detectives from the Criminal and Special Investigations sections, Middlesex County District Attorneys, and probation officers. The PSN Coordinator and other prosecutors from the

USAO, FBI, and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) agents represented federal enforcement agencies on the PSN Lowell task force.

### **PSN Lowell Working Group: Operations**

The Lowell working group convened monthly. At each meeting, participants worked on several tasks related to gun crime: scanning and discussing recent incidents and gun crime problems, making decisions about the most appropriate prosecution venues, and crafting intervention strategies. The working group began each meeting with a review of all of the gun crime that had occurred in Lowell since the last meeting (Klofas et al., 2006). Before the meetings, LPD detectives and research staff retrieved every gun violence incident or arrest report—regardless of crime type or severity—for the working group to review. The review was important for participants to get a sense of the immediate gun crime problems taking place in Lowell, establish what cases were priorities, and determine what problems required the most immediate response. From the case reviews and discussion, the working group typically proceeded to examine prosecutorial options and enforcement strategies.

A major element of PSN is the prosecution of gun crimes in the most appropriate venue, and the Lowell working group made this a major focus at each of its meetings (Decker et al., 2006). With both local and federal prosecutors attending, the group was able to decide how to prosecute each case in a manner that it felt would do the most to reduce firearm violence in the city. For many cases, this involved producing the longest sentence for the offender. On occasion the group decided that the offender involved may not be a real impact player and thus looked for a resolution that might provide the person a second chance. While the State of Massachusetts has relatively strict gun crime laws, the opportunity to prosecute an offender federally provided flexibility and special resources not available at the state level. For example, federal agencies had greater financial resources to devote to long-term investigations. The working group's goal for prosecution, according to participants, was to get the most serious, chronic offenders off the street as quickly and for as long as possible.

The working group chose prosecutorial avenues for offenders based on both formal and discretionary criteria. First, the offender had to meet the basic legal requirements to be eligible for prosecution by the U.S. Attorney's Office, including age and specific offense types. Next, from the pool of eligible offenders, the working group discussed which cases should be prosecuted locally or federally based primarily on the offender's criminal background or the offense. Based on information from LPD personnel, the characteristics that shaped this decision were the offender's depth of criminal history, perceived dangerousness to the community, and level of gang involvement. It was not always the case

that the most severe cases or serious offenders were prosecuted through the federal court system. If evidence or the type of case might be most effectively prosecuted in district court, the group would choose that venue. If the federal court offered an opportunity to prosecute a particular serious, chronic offender—perhaps for another, less serious crime—the group would use this option to put an offender who was seen to be an impact player behind bars.

One task force participant discussed an excellent example of the collaboration that developed between LPD detectives, federal agents, and federal prosecutors through PSN, based on an investigation of a homicide that occurred in Lowell. During the investigation, detectives uncovered a number of unlicensed firearms and silencers through a search warrant in a storage facility that a suspect was renting. LPD detectives expected, based on their experience, that this case would receive a possession of an illegal firearm charge and result in the defendant receiving bail and being released for trial at a much later date. To avoid this, an LPD detective and a working group member solicited the help of federal prosecutors to have the suspect charged with federal weapons violations. As a result, the suspect was arraigned in U.S. District Court and held without bail until trial. The working relationship that had developed through PSN provided an opportunity to keep a potentially serious offender off the street immediately until homicide charges could be brought.

Finally, the working group used the meetings to discuss potential enforcement strategies. With information from the case review, local knowledge from working group members, and problem analysis conducted by research partners, the working group was able to discuss new ways to address gun violence problems. As one member described the process, the group discussed the “game plan” for each gun violence problem as it arose. It was in these meetings that enforcement alternatives were debated and later refined as they were implemented in the community.

## **Problem Analysis**

A core element of PSN is to implement gun crime interventions based on a detailed understanding of the nature of gun violence problems within the local community. PSN facilitates this strategic or data-driven approach by including research partners on task forces and working groups. In Lowell, research partners from Harvard and Northeastern Universities worked directly with LPD personnel and other working group members to conduct problem analysis early in PSN implementation (for a detailed discussion of process, see Braga et al., 2006). The goal of the problem analysis was to provide the working group and police policymakers with accurate information about gun violence in Lowell. In general, the problem analysis sought to consoli-



date various viewpoints of the gun violence problem as well as test and refine the department's established understanding of gun violence.

The methodology included both quantitative and qualitative sources of information. First, available official crime data sources were brought together and analyzed to develop a basic understanding of the city's gun violence. Researchers analyzed data on homicides (2000 through 2002) and aggravated assaults (2002) to answer questions about victim and offender demographics, temporal and spatial patterns, and the extent of firearm use. In addition, the Massachusetts Criminal History System Board's Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) was matched with the incident data to capture the known criminal histories and criminal justice system involvement of offenders and victims. This information was important, among other reasons, to determine the extent to which offenders were subject to existing criminal justice system options (i.e., probation or parole violations).

To augment the basic information provided by the official sources of data, the research partners relied on qualitative sources of information. Over the course of the analysis, research partners from Harvard held focus groups with the LPD Investigative Services Division and the LPD Gang Unit, reviewed homicide and aggravated gun assault reports and case files with LPD detectives, and conducted informal interviews and participant observation. This research specifically addressed the extent of gang involvement in serious gun violence. Both the official data sources and the information produced through the qualitative sources presented a clearer picture of the nature of gun violence and the extent of gang involvement in Lowell. It is interesting to note that the analysis did not describe a situation drastically different from that perceived by the Lowell police, but rather validated the problem that the police had identified and provided a more systematic and broad ranging view of gun violence in Lowell.

## **Nature of Gun Violence in Lowell**

The problem analysis provided the working group with a breakdown of the incident characteristics of the serious gun violence incidents in Lowell (see figure 1 below). Analysis of department incident data revealed that young, minority males were disproportionately offenders and victims of serious gun violence. In 34 aggravated assault incidents that occurred in 2002, the department records identified 51 victims and 22 offenders. Males made up over 95 percent of identified offenders and 60 percent of all victims. Males committed and were victims of every homicide that occurred in the city from 2000 to 2002. A substantial percentage of aggravated gun assaults were committed by youth (13.6 percent by youth under 18, 31.9 percent by 18 to 24 year olds). Youth were even more likely to be the victims of aggravated gun assaults, with 31.4 percent of victims younger than 18 and another 23.5 percent between the ages of 18 and 24. A majority of homicide

**Figure 1: Summary of Gun Crime Problem in Lowell**

- Young, minority males disproportionately offenders and victims of gun violence.
- Gun crime offenders and victims had extensive prior criminal histories.
- Gang members account for a substantial portion of gun violence.
- Gangs tend to be small, loosely organized groups primarily located in the Hispanic and Asian communities.

offenders (57.9 percent) and just under half (45.5 percent) of the aggravated gun assault offenders were Hispanic, while Whites made up 15.8 percent of homicide offenders and roughly a third of aggravated assault offenders (31.8 percent) (Braga et al., 2006).

Using CORI data, research partners examined the criminal histories and involvement of offenders and victims of serious gun violence. Fully 81.8 percent (18 of 22) of known aggravated gun assault offenders and 94.7 percent (18 of 19) of gun homicide offenders had some prior crime known to the criminal justice system. Of the known aggravated gun assault offenders with prior records, offense histories included a range of violent and property offenses. A substantial majority of offenders had a prior armed violent offense (66.7 percent) and/or a prior unarmed violent offense (72.2 percent). Victims of aggravated gun assaults were much less involved in prior gun violence (39.1 percent) than offenders, but had a similar rate of involvement in unarmed violent crime (69.6 percent) (Braga et al., 2006).

Gang members accounted for a substantial portion of gun violence in Lowell. Based on information from LPD's gang intelligence database and a focus group of detectives, 73.7 percent of gun homicide offenders (14 of 19) and 45.5 percent of aggravated gun assault offenders (10 of 22) were active gang members. Looking at incidents, the working group classified 26.5 percent of aggravated gun assaults as "gang-related" and an additional 8.8 percent as "gang- and drug-related," which together are the most prevalent incident characteristic in Lowell. Other incident characteristics are personal dispute (20.6 percent), drug dealing that is not gang related (11.8 percent), domestic dispute (17.6 percent), and robbery/carjacking/home invasion (11.8 percent) (Braga et al., 2006).

Gang membership, the organization of gangs, and the nature of gang conflict in Lowell were important issues for the working group and police. Information drawn from focus groups with detectives from the LPD Investigative Services Division was used to determine the picture of gangs in Lowell. At the time of this report, there are 19 active



street gangs in the community, with an estimated 650 to 750 members. Most of these gangs are small, loosely organized groups and tended to be located in either the Hispanic or the Asian communities, with very little interracial membership.

## Strategic Interventions

### General Gun Violence Strategic Intervention

With the PSN partnerships in place, the working group began to implement a gun violence intervention strategy in Lowell. The intervention was largely based on the targeted deterrence model, or “pulling levers,” used in nearby Boston in the mid-1990s. Popularized by the Boston Operation Ceasefire Program, the targeted deterrence approach seeks to prevent gun crime by clearly and dramatically increasing the likelihood and severity of criminal justice sanctions in the minds of serious, chronic, gang-involved offenders (Kennedy, 1997; Braga et al., 2006). Facilitated by interagency and community partners, which include police, probation, parole, social service providers, and community organizations, the approach calls for officials to send an unambiguous message that offender groups are under increased surveillance and that violence will not be tolerated and will be met with serious repercussions. Due to the cooperation of a network of criminal justice agencies in the approach, interagency partnerships have at their disposal a number of criminal justice levers, or possible sanctions, including probation revocation, increased community-based surveillance, and federal prosecution in addition to routine arrest and prosecution. As a targeted intervention, the approach immediately focuses on those individuals or gangs that engage in violence.

In Lowell, the basic initial strategic intervention followed this model closely. The PSN working group and LPD set up a broader partnership that involved Department of Youth Services (DYS) case-workers, Streetworkers (a coalition of social service workers), and other community-based organizations. When gangs engaged in violent behaviors, the department, together with these partners, sent a direct message that violence-involved gangs could expect greater scrutiny by the partner criminal justice agencies. This message was delivered in a wide variety of forums. The police participated in offender notification meetings (McDevitt et al., 2006), and the LPD provided additional names to local probation officers who were already conducting home visits. Police and probation officers and DYS case workers increased contacts with youth gang members, telling them explicitly that the attention they received was in response to violence. Streetworkers and other community-based organizations worked in coordination with law enforcement and were essential for supporting the communication of the targeted deterrence message. The message was also facilitated in Lowell through community forums and fliers that

explained the reasons for targeted enforcement. With the support of a network of criminal justice agencies, the working group coordinated an array of enforcement options when dealing with specific groups engaged in violence. As the problem analysis revealed, individuals involved in serious gun violence in Lowell tended to be involved in a host of other violent and non-violent crimes. Moreover, the problem analysis confirmed that many gun crime offenders were under some level of criminal justice supervision and many more had some experience with the criminal justice system. The working group recognized that these characteristics of gun offenders, similar to those other cities where analysis has been conducted (e.g., Boston), made potential offenders amenable to community supervision, probation checks, outstanding warrants, and increased police contact (Bynum et al., 2006).

### **Targeted Response to Asian Youth Gang Violence**

In 2001 and early 2002, Lowell began to see an increase in gun assaults by youth involved in Asian gangs. In one incident, two Asian gang members were shot to death in a single act of retaliation. In another incident a 7-year-old Asian girl was shot, but not killed, in an attack targeting an Asian gang member. The police and community felt that something had to be done quickly before the gun violence escalated even further.

Very early in the implementation of PSN in Lowell, working group members were skeptical about the capacity of a basic targeted deterrence approach to prevent gun violence associated with Asian youth gangs. LPD was seeing an increase in Asian gang violence, but did not have strong intelligence about Asian gang structures. First, LPD detectives reported that information about specific offenders was often difficult to acquire because of the reluctance of witnesses in this community to cooperate with police. They relayed that even when responding to incidents of street violence, potential witnesses would say nothing or leave when police arrived. Lack of cooperation was attributed not only to a cultural distrust of the police, but also to what officials perceived as a real sense of fear of retaliation in the community. Second, because of this, the working group lacked good information about whom they should “pull levers” on in these gangs. Similar to previous gang research, Asian gangs in Lowell tended to be more secretive and less involved in street open drug markets, which made them less vulnerable to targeted deterrence than their Hispanic counterparts.

The working group understood that a different approach was needed to deal with gun violence associated with Asian youth gangs and discussed various strategies. The strategic intervention that the working group and the department agreed to was based on a new understanding of crime and the structure of youth gangs within the Asian community. This new perspective was the result of several

factors or events that changed the way the department understood the nature of crime within the community.

First, detectives acknowledged that Southeast Asian residents and business owners attending a major community meeting appeared very reluctant to share information openly with the police. These residents reported to police that everything was fine in their neighborhoods, that they had no complaints about police, and were generally satisfied. Later, some residents told police that other residents and business owners would not speak to the police openly because they feared retaliation from organized crime groups. Some of the residents also indicated that those who came to the meeting had been told what to say beforehand. This meeting seemed to reinforce a growing perception that there was a very real fear of talking to the police.

Faced with little information about gun crime learned through public forums, leadership began to aggressively recruit informants. Detectives from specialized gang and narcotics units reported they had very few, if any, useful informants in the Asian community. In follow-up interviews, these detectives pointed out that this initiative had drastically improved the informant base, but that more needed to be done. It was also reported that transfers into specialized detective units were based in part on whether or not the detective had successfully developed informants in the past. New information from informants suggested that illegal gambling in Lowell was more extensive and had closer ties to organized crime than previously believed. Important to the development of the intervention, they also helped provide some evidence about the relationship between “elders” and Asian youth gangs in Lowell that was highlighted in the problem analysis. Overall, the use of informants seemed a useful way for detectives to gain information about crime in a community they knew little about.

Finally, the formal problem analysis helped to consolidate LPD’s knowledge about Southeast Asian youth gang crime. Using a variety of department personnel, the problem analysis was able to articulate an understanding about the structure of these gangs. Most importantly, the intelligence revealed a strong relationship between the Asian street gangs in Lowell and older members of the Asian community who were engaged in gambling. In fact, some recent gang violence seemed to have been associated with gambling involving older Asian individuals who operated businesses that served as fronts for gambling. Since the information fit with other patterns of Asian gangs, the researchers also helped place local knowledge of Asian youth gangs in the context of previous, albeit limited, research on Asian gangs elsewhere. Ultimately, the working group used the department’s understanding to construct a tailored intervention to the gun violence associated with Asian youth gangs. (For additional analysis in the development of the response to Asian gang violence, see Braga et al., 2006.)

### Intervention

The strategic intervention designed to combat gun violence associated with Asian youth gangs built upon Lowell’s targeted deterrence model. However, it did so by using a unique “lever” of organized gambling interests. The working group decided to turn their efforts to the gambling houses to see if this increased attention, and consequent loss of business, would lead those involved with gambling to put pressure on the younger gang members to reduce the violence. Initially, LPD detectives met with operators of storefronts thought to be involved in gambling to deliver a message to those who operated gambling business that gun violence would not be tolerated. During the initial interactions between the police and business owners, the police found additional evidence of a relationship between these businesses and Asian gangs—specifically, the police found clothes reflecting local gang “colors” and the presence of known gang members inside the businesses. In addition, it became clear that a number of gang members served as runners for certain gambling fronts.

In a few instances, LPD parked police cars or stationed patrol officers in front of gambling houses, reducing business rather dramatically. In a few instances where the business owner ignored detectives, the LPD executed search warrants for the gambling houses where intelligence indicated that they were involved very closely with the Asian gangs.

Figure 2 summarizes Lowell’s gun crime reduction strategies.

**Figure 2: Gun Crime Problem and PSN Strategies**

<b>Problem</b>	<b>Overall Strategy</b>	<b>Specific Components</b>
Small group of chronic violent gun offenders	Prosecute and incapacitate most serious and chronic gun violence impact players	Joint gun crime prosecution screening (federal and local); distinguish impact players from less serious offenders
Gangs	Pulling lever targeted deterrence	Direct communication of deterrence-based message to violence-involved gangs (offender notification meetings, probation home visits, and police and Streetworker communication to gangmembers); increased surveillance and supervision of gang members under criminal justice authority
Lack of leverage over Asian youth gangs	Focus deterrence message on adults to exert influence over Asian youth gangs	Direct communication to adults in the Asian community involved in gambling to exert social control over Asian youth gangs with respect to their involvement in gun crime; actual and threatened enforcement on gambling operations influences to adults to exert their influence

## Intervention Evaluation

The implementation experience in Lowell illustrates core PSN elements. The interagency working group brought together federal, state, and local resources to combat gun crime, providing greater flexibility in the prosecution of gun crimes by adding federal avenues to more common local prosecutions. LPD, together with its PSN partners, enhanced its capacity to analyze the nature of gun violence and gang structure, allowing the working group and the department to develop information-driven strategies for addressing gun violence problems. As indicated above, Lowell focused on gun violence by Asian gang members, which primarily took the form of aggravated assaults by members of one Asian gang on members of rival Asian gangs.

This section describes an assessment of the impact that the interventions may have had on indicators of gun violence, including homicides, aggravated assaults with a firearm, robberies with a firearm, and shots-fired calls-for-service. Data were drawn from quarterly progress reports from cities in Massachusetts, which were part of the PSN reporting requirements. All data were provided by law enforcement officials, and as such, reflect the limitations of official data sources, such as classification problems and underreporting. These indicators, on the other hand, offers the advantage of standard measures employed in the national PSN initiative, thus providing some objectivity to the following analysis.

Recognizing the importance of local context, PSN allows a great deal of local discretion in selecting particular interventions. For example, local PSN working groups may design a successful strategy for reducing a specific outbreak of gun violence, but not focus on other forms of gun violence. The result may be a more limited success of a highly targeted intervention.

Assessing real world enforcement initiatives like PSN is always a difficult task. Isolating treatment effect from confounding explanations (i.e., underlying historical trends and multiple treatments), accurately depicting the start and stop of interventions, ambiguity regarding the choice of outcome measures, and other methodological concerns inhibit this kind of analysis. With these caveats in mind, the following assessment uses a simple pre-post intervention analysis and then augments this by examining several comparison sites to determine the impact of the interventions.

### Pre-Post Intervention Analysis

The gun violence intervention strategy targeting Asian youth gangs began in October 2002. This date represents the start of police executing search warrants on gambling houses and, as a result, an increase in arrests for related crimes. The goal of executing search warrants and arrests was to send a message to Asian youth gangs to stop all violence.

Although, based on the problem analysis, most youth gangs were not directly affiliated with gambling, it was evident that organized gambling interests consisted of individuals who might be able to help control the activity of youth street gangs. Any impact of the targeted deterrence intervention in Lowell could be empirically observed by comparing the prevalence of gun crime indicators before the start of the intervention and after it was implemented. The specific focus of the PSN Lowell intervention was on gun assaults involving gang-related youth. Thus, the following analysis is focused on aggravated assaults with a gun. In addition, the task force sought an overall reduction in gun crime, and thus it is important to monitor the trends in other types of gun crime, such as armed robbery with a gun, gun-related calls-for-service, and homicides.

Figure 3 presents the pre- and post-intervention totals and averages (per month) for these gun crime indicators. As the table shows, aggravated assaults with a gun declined from 4.94 per a month in the pre-intervention period to 3.56 for the post-intervention period.<sup>8</sup> This represents a 28.02 percent decline in aggravated assaults with a gun—or one less gun assault per month. In contrast, robberies with a gun actually increased from 2.33 before the crackdown to 3.30 after (a 41.27 percent increase). Since the intervention was targeted toward assaultive behavior, it is reasonable to expect an impact in assaults and not other forms of gun crime.

According to these data, there appears to be little decline in shots-fired calls-for-service or homicide. Shots-fired calls declined slightly from 9.15 to 9.00 per month. Because homicides with a gun are a rare event in Lowell, detecting intervention effects is very problematic. There were nine in the 33 months before the intervention and eight gun homicides in the 27 months after the intervention.

**Figure 3: Pre-Post Comparison of Violent Gun Crime Indicators, City of Lowell**

Gun Violence Indicator	Pre-Intervention Period (33 Months)		Post-Intervention Period (27 Months)		Percent Change
	Total	Avg. Per Month	Total	Avg. Per Month	
Gun Homicides	9	.27	8	0.30	8.64
Gun Aggravated Assaults	163	4.94	96	3.56	-28.02
Gun Robberies	77	2.33	89	3.30	41.27
Shots-Fired CFS	247	9.15	243	9	-1.62



The results suggest some success in terms of reduction of gun violence outcomes in Lowell. Notably, there was a large decline in aggravated assaults with a gun, particularly important since this behavior was the primary focus of the PSN intervention in Lowell.<sup>9</sup>

While the direct evidence of the relationship between the city's Asian gangs and the gambling businesses is limited, in interviews with gang members after the initial crackdown on these businesses, it became clear that gang members were acutely aware of the pressure being placed on these businesses and that there was some level of ongoing communication between the two groups.

When attempting this kind of simple pre- and post-intervention comparison, the evaluator must make assumptions about the expected lag and duration of the effect. The analysis assumes that the impact of the searches, beginning in October 2002, was immediate and lasted throughout the intervention. Absent any specific knowledge of how long it would take for the targeted deterrence message to reach potential offenders and change their behavior, an expectation of an immediate impact is reasonable. Changing the date of the post-intervention by allowing for some lag time, moreover, does not substantively change the results for any of these crime indicators.

The issue of when the effect of deterrence intervention might end is trickier. To date, the department has never formally abandoned the use of the intervention (executing search warrants for gambling houses when Asian youth gangs engaged in violence), yet interviews suggest that the usage has tapered off. Moreover, it is unclear whether such a strategy would have a lasting or short-term effect. The observed trend in gun assaults after the introduction of the intervention is downward, meaning that selecting any post-intervention time period would decrease the observed effect of the intervention (on average). This is not necessarily a threat to the findings because the intervention may have caused a change in the trend of gun violence.

Another limitation to the above analysis is that it does not rule out the influence of spurious explanations for the changes in the gun violence indicators. Factors that affect statewide trends in gun violence may have led to the decline in aggravated gun assaults or shots-fired calls-for-service reported in figure 3. One, albeit limited method, to isolate the intervention effect is to introduce one or more control cities and examine the change they experienced during the same time. Is the decline in gun assaults in Lowell the result of the intervention or of some underlying trend affecting other similar cities in Massachusetts?

## Comparison Analysis

To test whether the findings hold, the decline in gun assaults within Lowell was compared to the change in gun assaults in six Massachusetts cities: Brockton, Boston, Fall River, Lawrence, Springfield,

and Worcester. These cities were selected because they provided relatively reliable information on gun crime through PSN progress reports and, as such, were reasonable comparison cities. All cities for which data were available are included, rather than impose judgments about which cities are best matches.

Figure 4 shows the monthly average number of gun assaults before and after the introduction of the targeted deterrence intervention in Lowell. It also compares the difference and percent change across all cities. A negative number refers to a decline in the average monthly number of gun assaults from pre- to post-intervention periods, while a positive number reflects an increase. As noted in the table, the series for each of the comparison sites does not match Lowell's monthly series of gun assaults.<sup>10</sup>

As the table shows, Lowell experienced the greatest decrease in aggravated gun assaults after the introduction of the intervention. Lowell's aggravated gun assaults declined by an average of 1.38 per month, a 28 percent decline. Worcester, Brockton, and Boston also experienced declines in gun assaults during this same time period, ranging

**Figure 4: Comparison of Pre- to Post-Intervention Change in Aggravated Assaults with a Firearm in Select Massachusetts Cities**

City	Aggravated Assaults with a Firearm		Difference	Percent Change
	Pre-Intervention Monthly Average	Post-Intervention Monthly Average		
Lowell	4.94	3.56	-1.38	-28.02
Boston	37.61	36.50	-1.11	-2.94
Brockton	8.76	8.04	-0.72	-8.27
Fall River	2.52	4.75	2.23	88.86
Lawrence	1.62	3.18	1.56	96.52
Springfield	27.55	46.57	19.03	69.07
Worcester	7.48	6.59	-0.89	-11.92

**Notes:**

Boston and Fall River data are missing the last 3 months of the series. Post-intervention monthly average computed by dividing total by 24 months.

Springfield data are missing the last 6 months from series. Post-intervention monthly average computed by dividing total by 21 months.

Brockton and Lawrence data are missing the first year from series. Pre-intervention monthly average computed by dividing total by 21 months.



from 3 to 12 percent reductions. In contrast, Fall River, Lawrence, and Springfield experienced significant increases. Overall, the findings of this comparison analysis are consistent with the finding that PSN Lowell may have resulted in a reduction in aggravated assaults with a gun, consistent with the simple pre-post test analysis.

### **Interagency Working Group Implementation: Lessons Learned**

Interagency networks are a growing part of public administration and law enforcement (O'Toole and Meier 2004). As this study illustrates, interagency partnerships provide resources, information sharing, and flexibility in choosing responses not available in more classic law enforcement agencies. The successful delivery of services through a network of enforcement practitioners requires the maintenance of effective partnerships and regular participation from member agencies. Several factors led to successful PSN partnerships in Lowell: 1) authority and organizational support, 2) leadership, 3) reciprocity, and 4) trust.

First, the experience in Lowell suggests that it is necessary for personnel involved directly in interagency partnerships (e.g., task forces and working groups) to have the authority and support from their organizations to participate meaningfully. When the working group made decisions about how to prosecute a case, LPD detectives were not required to check with superiors. This was a function of their position within the department—they were all high-ranking detectives—and the support the department leadership gave them. Based on the policing model created within the department, the chief expected detectives to participate in partnerships, making decisions within the working group with little oversight. This occurred even though these decisions influenced enforcement practices, the use of resources, and changed the way the department processed specific cases. Had detectives with less authority or support been assigned to the working groups, participation might have been less meaningful.

Similarly, the authority and resources that the USAO gave the PSN Coordinator provided wide latitude to implement the districtwide task force and participate directly in the working group, which was invaluable to maintaining the partnership. The USAO dedicated a full-time prosecutor to coordinate PSN throughout the district, which allowed the PSN Coordinator to take a strong leadership position, develop regular contacts at PSN agencies to maintain constant communication, and keep the task force focused on gun crime in multiple participating cities. Moreover, the PSN Coordinator was also able to participate directly in particular initiatives, such as the PSN Lowell working group, to facilitate sharing prosecutorial resources.

Leadership from the PSN Coordinator was a critical factor in maintaining this partnership. While PSN is designed to be a partnership among equals, it is necessary to have leadership, particularly from a

participant directly responsible for maintaining the group. In follow-up interviews, participants gave a great deal of credit to the PSN Coordinator for making the partnership work and making it worth their involvement. They reported that, as a leader, the PSN Coordinator kept the group focused on its goal of prosecuting serious gun crimes and helped to avoid interagency competition. In the District of Massachusetts and in Lowell, the working group was undoubtedly stronger because of the efforts from the PSN Coordinator. Such leadership might not have been possible, however, without the level of commitment from the USAO.

Another important consideration is reciprocal relationships between the participants and their organizations. Interagency partnerships must provide some professional benefit for their participants' time and effort. Detectives from Lowell, for example, reported that the resources federal agencies brought to bear on investigations and developing informants was extremely valuable to them. Similarly, federal agents were included in local investigations, where they typically would not be involved. This provided alternative perspective and enforcement options that helped the working group fit the punishment to the level of harm caused by the offender.

The working group in Lowell worked well as an interagency partnership, meeting regularly and keeping the PSN initiative focused on gun crime problem solving and prosecution. The various viewpoints of enforcement agencies and academic partners broadened the group's understanding of gun violence in Lowell. Prosecutions were directly coordinated through the working group meetings and the local-federal relationships, which allowed them to develop local knowledge that might lead them to develop a case where there had been a federal violation.

Finally, it is important to recognize, especially for other local police agencies, that a successful partnership must be a long-term endeavor that requires establishing trust. In Lowell, the close working relationships that developed between the LPD, federal enforcement agencies, and the USAO built upon and extended existing partnerships. LPD detectives had a history of working with federal law enforcement agencies, particularly the ATF. Local police personnel expected to be equal partners based on this ongoing collaboration with federal agencies. Police agencies seeking to engage in PSN or other interagency partnership simply cannot expect the partnership to work overnight. Because PSN partnerships are designed to foster creative, interagency responses, they will likely challenge standard ways of doing business. Mutual trust allows the prospect of new responses and ideas to address gun violence to be seen as positive developments, rather than criticisms of existing agency efforts.

Figure 5 provides a summary of the key components of the PSN Lowell task force.

**Figure 5: Summary of Key Components of PSN Lowell's Successful PSN Task Force**

<b>Key Component</b>	<b>Description</b>
USAO and police department commitment to and familiarity with strategic problem model	USAO experience in Boston Operation Ceasefire Program; LPD's commitment to community policing, problem solving, research, and crime analysis facilitate implementation of PSN
Builds on prior initiatives and partnerships	Safety First; High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area; Cross Border Initiative; DEA, FBI, and local law enforcement; DYS caseworkers, Streetworkers, and community-based organizations
Regular task force meetings	PSN Lowell working group meets regularly, reviews all gun crime incidents, case screening review (federal or local prosecution), targeted enforcement strategies
Delegation of decisionmaking authority to working group members	LPD detectives, Assistant U.S. Attorneys, and county prosecutors involved in PSN Lowell task force were given authority to make decisions consistent with PSN mission
Leadership of PSN Coordinator	PSN Coordinator played a very active leadership role in PSN Lowell task force; maintained group focus on gun crime, strategic problem solving, and task force accountability
Reciprocal benefits to participating agencies	Examples include LPD detectives noting benefit of threat of federal prosecution in developing informants and furthering investigations; involvement of federal partners created focus on local gun crime problem

## Conclusion

Project Safe Neighborhoods in Lowell presents an innovative approach to dealing with an emerging form of gun violence. The Lowell Police Department, in conjunction with the U.S. Attorney's Office and its academic partners, performed an analysis of the problem and developed an innovative approach to addressing it. By focusing on gambling in Lowell, the working group was able to influence Asian gangs in the city to reduce gun assaults. While the results of this analysis are limited, it appears that the PSN initiative in Lowell reduced gun assaults, a reduction that has been sustained for more than 2 years.

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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 United States. 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. This is not including the District of Columbia and Florida, which have incomplete data according to *Crime in the United States, 2003*.

8. This difference in mean is significant using a two-tailed test ( $p < .05$ ). None of the indicators exhibit significant increases or decreases from pre- to post-intervention.

9. The problem analysis and intervention components are further described in Braga, McDevitt, and Pierce, 2006; Braga is conducting a thorough outcome analysis of the PSN Lowell intervention and reports finding an intervention effort consistent with that reported herein.

10. Since the series reported here do not reflect an identical time period, only common periods across the sites changing results were tested. For example, the analysis was restricted to a comparison between the changes 1 year (12 months) pre-intervention to 1 year (12 months) post-intervention. In this analysis and others, Lowell still demonstrated the greatest decline in aggravated assaults with a gun.