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# GUN SHY: TURNING VIOLENT CRIMINALS INTO ANTI-VIOLENCE ADVOCATES

*by* IAN BARNEY

The piercing crackle of fatal gunshots reminds Chicagoans daily of their city's notorious reputation for gun violence. In 2008, the 412 victims murdered at the discharge of a firearm accounted for more than 80 percent of the City's total murders.<sup>1</sup> Project Safe Neighborhoods is a federal program focused on dismantling Chicago's gun violence problem. The program seeks to reduce gun violence in Chicago by increasing enforcement of gun crimes and altering community perceptions about the detriments of gun violence.

## CHICAGO'S PLAGUE

Experts view Chicago's violence problem as a serious public health issue.<sup>2</sup> From 2004 to 2009, Chicago has averaged 512 murders per year or 18.2 murders for every 100,000 citizens.<sup>3</sup> This figure comes into sharp perspective when compared with New York City and Los Angeles, where murder rates in 2008 hovered at 6.2 per 100,000 and 10 per 100,000, respectively. Additionally, in 2008, more than 80 percent of Chicago's murders involved a firearm,<sup>4</sup> compared to 66 percent of murders in New York City.<sup>5</sup>

Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley has been outspoken about gun violence, calling the issue "a national epidemic."<sup>6</sup> He has also pushed for stricter laws to restrict access to guns, particularly assault weapons. "If reasonable local gun laws could have prevented even one . . . needless death[ ], it would have been important," Daley said.<sup>7</sup> "Instead, the violence continues."<sup>8</sup>

In his push for stricter gun laws, Daley has voiced his opposition to the Supreme Court's *Heller* decision, which overruled Washington D.C.'s handgun ban.<sup>9</sup> *Heller* spurred a constitutional challenge to a similar law on the books in Chicago.<sup>10</sup>

Despite Daley's engagement on the issue, violence in Chicago has increasingly spread to vulnerable youth populations. During the 2007 to 2008 school year, 27 Chicago Public School students were killed and another 211 were shot.<sup>11</sup> Those numbers rose during the 2008 to 2009 school year to 34 killed and 290 shot.<sup>12</sup>

As Chicago's violence has spread to students, the crisis has gained considerable public attention. Daley has stayed out in front of the issue, urging Chicagoans to "encourage our children to stand up against violence in the community and help create a healthy, non-violent society."<sup>13</sup>

The threat of violence, however, does not extend to every school district in Chicago. Rather, more than 80 percent of shootings involving Chicago Public School students involved only 38 of Chicago's 89 public high schools, demonstrating a significant concentration of violence.<sup>14</sup>

The Mayor is not alone in his recognition and repudiation of youth violence. After the death of Derrion Albert, a 16 year old who was beaten to death after school in a gang-related melee, the Chicago Tribune dedicated a symposium of articles to youth violence.<sup>15</sup>

The common thread among those who care deeply about this issue is a yearning for an answer. Although Chicago has implemented a plethora of community violence prevention programs,<sup>16</sup> gun violence remains a serious problem.<sup>17</sup>

#### STRATEGIC INTERVENTION: REDUCING GUN VIOLENCE IN CHICAGO

Project Safe Neighborhoods is determined to change that. The project focuses on stringent enforcement of current gun laws,<sup>18</sup> strives to prevent the vulnerable from becoming offenders,<sup>19</sup> and assists ex-offenders in completing successful re-entry into society.<sup>20</sup>

Project Safe Neighborhoods' enforcement efforts are highly specified, targeting those most at risk of being a victim or offender of a gun crime.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the program focuses its efforts on changing the community attitudes toward gun violence and the law.<sup>22</sup>

In 2002, Project Safe Neighborhoods officially began to tackle Chicago's gun violence problem.<sup>23</sup>

The program's first priority was to choose the target neighborhoods for strategic intervention.<sup>24</sup> Researchers involved with the project performed studies that immediately confirmed what residents of Chicago know by intuition: Chicago's gun violence problem is heavily concentrated in just a few highly impoverished, socially isolated neighborhoods.<sup>25</sup>

Particularly, researchers quickly recognized that areas of the West Side and the South Side of Chicago exhibited incidents of gun violence well above the City average.<sup>26</sup> The research showed that the target districts for the West Side of Chicago had a homicide rate of 75.5 per 100,000,<sup>27</sup> while the control group on the South Side of Chicago had rates just below 40 per 100,000.<sup>28</sup>

The first step to strategic intervention was implementing a "get tough" enforcement approach. The Chicago Police Department, working together with the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the Cook

County States Attorney's Office and the U.S. Attorney's Office ramped up efforts to remove illegal guns from the streets.<sup>29</sup> These agencies also engage in bi-weekly meetings to decide whether to prosecute gun cases at the federal level.<sup>30</sup>

Bolstered federal prosecution is designed to increase the deterrent effect of committing a gun crime.<sup>31</sup> A suspect with a prior criminal history who is charged with a gun crime in federal court could face up to a 15 year minimum sentence of incarceration if convicted.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, the Chicago Police Department will publish posters picturing a community gun offender and listing his hefty term of federal incarceration.<sup>33</sup> Assistant U.S. Attorney John Lausch notes that the implication of these posters is clear. "This is someone everyone in the community knows," Lausch says.<sup>34</sup> "The message is: Don't let this be you."<sup>35</sup>

#### CHANGING BEHAVIOR BY CHANGING ATTITUDES

Just as important as Project Safe Neighborhoods' targeted enforcement approach are its efforts at changing community norms. Project Safe Neighborhoods uses education as a tool for deterrence, supplying both offenders and non-offenders in the community with perspectives on turning away from gun violence.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps the most important of these efforts are the Offender Notification Forums and the Follow-up Re-entry Program. These programs are based on the Project Safe Neighborhoods team's belief that "the key to changing the pattern of gun crime lies in altering the normative beliefs of gun users themselves."<sup>37</sup>

As part of these programs, the U.S. Attorney's Office requests that community offenders currently on parole or probation attend a forum hosted by Project Safe Neighborhoods.<sup>38</sup> Typically, these offenders have a history of gun violence and gang participation.<sup>39</sup>

The forums are hour-long round table discussions with approximately 20 to 25 offenders, state and local law enforcement officials and community representatives.<sup>40</sup> Assistant U.S. Attorney Nancy DePodesta describes the forums as "a feature unique to Chicago's program" back in 2002.<sup>41</sup> Typically a forum will

have representatives from the Chicago Police Department, ATF, and the U.S. Attorney's Office.<sup>42</sup>

"The discussion opens with a scared straight message," says Assistant U.S. Attorney John Lausch.<sup>43</sup> This opening message outlines the consequences of committing a gun crime.<sup>44</sup> The group then spends the remainder of the hour discussing the choices the ex-offenders must make in order to ensure they do not reoffend.<sup>45</sup>

At each meeting an ex-offender tells his own story.<sup>46</sup> The ex-offender discusses avoiding a life of crime since conviction and emphasizes the importance of reducing community violence.<sup>47</sup>

After the meetings formally conclude, the discussion continues as an informal meet-and-greet between law enforcement, community representatives and ex-offenders.<sup>48</sup> The forums sometimes present ex-offenders with a chance to meet employers in the community who may be hiring.<sup>49</sup> "The forums usually at least provide someone who can place the offenders in jobs, if not offer them a job," says DePodesta.<sup>50</sup> Often present at the forums are representatives of organizations and service providers dedicated to helping ex-offenders get back on their feet.<sup>51</sup>

Lausch acknowledges that the practical effects of these forums are difficult to calculate.<sup>52</sup> However, the forums are at least correlated with reduced crime rates. As of January 2009, individuals who attended a Project Safe Neighborhoods forum experienced a recidivism rate decrease of 30 percent.<sup>53</sup> Further, half of all offenders outside of Project Safe Neighborhoods' outreach efforts re-offended within three years of being released from prison, while only 25 percent of offenders who participated in Project Safe Neighborhoods' forum program re-offended during that same period.<sup>54</sup>

## TARGETING YOUTH

In addition to educating ex-offenders, Project Safe Neighborhoods implements programs aimed at changing youth attitudes towards gun violence.<sup>55</sup> Two of Chicago's programs, which have also been implemented in other cities, are Hands without Guns and In My Shoes.<sup>56</sup>

Hands without Guns focuses on educating Chicago Public School students about ways to avoid or mitigate situations that could lead to gun violence.<sup>57</sup> The goal of the campaign is to engage “young people as violence prevention advocates in their communities.”<sup>58</sup> The program consists of workshops designed to give young people a better understanding of the effects of gun violence on themselves, their families and their community.<sup>59</sup>

In My Shoes is a program that brings victims of gun violence to students.<sup>60</sup> The victims, who have suffered a spinal cord or brain injury due to street violence, engage the students in dialogue sessions.<sup>61</sup> In these sessions, the victims warn at-risk students from low-income neighborhoods of the consequences of negative behavior and encourage the students to pursue education.<sup>62</sup>

Nancy DePodesta describes the presentations as “detailed and graphic.”<sup>63</sup> “They give a real depiction of what it’s like to be a victim of gun violence,” she says.<sup>64</sup> In almost all cases, the speakers are wheelchair bound due to their injuries.<sup>65</sup>

#### REDUCING VIOLENCE IN CHICAGO

Researchers with Project Safe Neighborhoods believe that the program’s violence reduction strategy has been successful.<sup>66</sup> They point to a 37 percent reduction in the monthly homicide rate in the target areas during the first two years of the program’s implementation.<sup>67</sup> This reduction is substantially greater than the reduction experienced by the remainder of the City.<sup>68</sup>

However, Jens Ludwig, Co-Director of the University of Chicago Crime Lab, believes Project Safe Neighborhoods could be more effective.<sup>69</sup> Ludwig posits that the federal project would have a greater deterrent effect if it focused more on local targeted police patrols aimed at preventing illegal gun-carrying, rather than increased federal prosecution.<sup>70</sup>

Ludwig emphasizes that street-level enforcement, which increases the probability of punishment, seems to be more effective than federalizing gun cases, which increases the level of punishment.<sup>71</sup> According to Ludwig, patrols provide a greater deterrent effect because they provide increased certainty that committing a gun-crime will result in punishment.<sup>72</sup>

Ludwig also points to research suggesting that increased use of school-based programs involving peer leaders could help reduce gun violence.<sup>73</sup>

“Despite all the money and all the pilot programs that have been started, we are floundering around,” said Ludwig.<sup>74</sup> Ludwig pushes for more empirically based anti-violence programs in addition to rigorous evaluations of which anti-violence programs actually work.<sup>75</sup>

In line with Ludwig’s approach, the University of Chicago Crime Lab has sponsored a youth violence initiative called Becoming a Man – Sports Edition.<sup>76</sup> The program “seeks to help youth develop coping skills for managing situations that might otherwise lead to violence . . . .”<sup>77</sup>

Becoming a Man – Sports Edition provides youth-based group intervention, including counseling and life-preparedness programs.<sup>78</sup> These programs use cognitive behavior therapy to improve students’ emotional self-regulation and social skill development. The goal is to help students avoid potential conflicts.<sup>79</sup>

The program also exposes students to after-school sports opportunities.<sup>80</sup> These opportunities offer safe recreational activities directed by coaches trained in Becoming a Man – Sports Edition’s scientific model.<sup>81</sup>

Project Safe Neighborhoods encourages the type of initiative and ingenuity shown by Becoming a Man – Sports Edition.<sup>82</sup> In fact, Project Safe Neighborhoods’ approach to changing community attitudes towards gun violence is largely based on non-governmental programs.<sup>83</sup> Assistant U.S. Attorney John Lausch notes that community organizations created the Hands without Guns and In My Shoes programs, not the federal government.<sup>84</sup>

Lausch stresses that part of the success of Project Safe Neighborhoods depends on communities and organizations using innovative approaches to fight gun violence.<sup>85</sup> “We need these programs,” says Lausch.<sup>86</sup>

Though experts may disagree as to the preferred strategy for combating gun violence, they seem to agree that gun violence in Chicago is a problem worth fighting. The future of which depends on the success of programs like Becoming a Man – Sports Edition and Project Safe Neighborhoods.



## NOTES

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