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An Assessment of the Comprehensive Anti-Gang Initiative: Final Project Report

Executive Summary

Concerned with levels of gang-related violent crime and responding to field reports from officials involved in Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), the U.S. Department of Justice developed the Comprehensive Anti-Gang Initiative (CAGI) to support local communities in their efforts to prevent and control gang crime. Initial CAGI awards were made to six communities in 2006, four more in 2007, and two in 2008. The cities involved include Cleveland, Dallas/Fort Worth, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Tampa, Indianapolis, Oklahoma City, Rochester, Raleigh/Durham, Chicago, Detroit, and a seven-city region in Eastern Pennsylvania. The initiative was coordinated through the U.S. Attorney's Offices in these respective jurisdictions and funding was provided based on a proposal that outlined a comprehensive approach to gang violence prevention and control. Specific elements included enforcement, prevention, and reentry.

The School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University was provided a grant from the National Institute of Justice to conduct a process and outcome evaluation of the CAGI program. The initial award was intended to support an evaluation involving the initial six CAGI sites. However, to the extent possible the evaluation has expanded to include all 12 jurisdictions but with more intensive assessments in select jurisdictions.

Multiple methods were used in the evaluation. These included site visits throughout the project, phone interviews, mail surveys, video conference calls with project staff, and review of progress reports submitted to the Department of Justice. Multiple site visits were conducted in Cleveland, Dallas and Milwaukee. Local crime data were gathered from five of the CAGI cities and city level crime data were collected from all the jurisdictions as well as from comparable cities nationwide.

Limitations

One of the major limitations in the evaluation was the lack of reliable data on gang crime. With the exception of Chicago and Los Angeles, police officials reported that they either did not capture gang crime or they did not consider their gang data to be reliable over time. A common theme was that the police department would make an effort to capture gang crime during the CAGI project (often by having a designated police official read all police reports and make such a designation), but that the gang data would be isolated to the target area and/or would not be available for the pre-intervention period thus prohibiting trend analysis of impact. Consequently, much of the outcome analysis focuses on trends in violent crime believed to be associated with gang crime.

Similar limitations arose with respect to process measures related to the implementation of CAGI. To their credit, DOJ required the CAGI task forces to submit output data on the various components of their enforcement, prevention and reentry programs. Similarly, CAGI officials made significant efforts to collect these data. However, there was significant variation across the sites and the various agencies involved in CAGI in their ability to consistently provide such data. Similarly, the sites were unable to provide comparison data for their prevention,

intervention and reentry programs.¹ Consequently, the measures of program implementation are largely based on self-reports from CAGI officials. These data were compared to data reported to DOJ (e.g., numbers of gang arrests, youth served, etc.) and seemed to have face validity as indicators across the sites but future evaluations would benefit from consistently reported output measures of implementation.

Key Findings – Development and Implementation of CAGI

- There was consensus across the sites that CAGI had allowed for the development of a variety of new partnerships focused on gang prevention and control. These included partnerships between local, state, and federal law enforcement and criminal justice agencies, with other components of local government such as city government and the schools, with social service providers, and with various community groups (e.g., weed and seed, faith-based groups, neighborhood associations). As was observed in research on PSN (McGarrell et al. 2009), these relationships were most readily established among criminal justice agencies. Relationships with non-criminal justice partners tended to be more difficult to accomplish and took more time but were considered highly valued in terms of addressing gang crime in a comprehensive fashion.
- A wide variety of enforcement strategies were implemented. Four strategies, increased federal prosecution, increased state and local prosecution, joint case prosecution screening, and directed police patrols and field interrogations, were implemented by 12 of the 13 jurisdictions.² Ten jurisdictions used probation/parole home visits to targeted gang members and comprehensive gun crime tracing. Nine utilized most violent offender lists and eight called gang members or individuals at-risk for gang activity into offender notification meetings. The majority of CAGI enforcement teams included the service of warrants on gang members, and six jurisdictions used a nuisance abatement strategy to address problem properties and businesses. The least common strategy reported by CAGI officials was gang abatement ordinances that were utilized in Dallas, Durham and Raleigh.
- As noted above, there was significant variation across the sites in terms of their collection of gang-specific information. For example, only a small number of the jurisdictions could report on the number of gang crime incidents. Similarly, even though a number of the CAGI task forces collected data on gang prosecutions, this involved special efforts for the initiative as opposed to existing and continuing information systems that track gang prosecutions. The combination of limitations on gang-specific crime and prosecution records created challenges in establishing consistent performance measures for gang enforcement.
- There was also a fair degree of consistency in terms of the types of prevention and intervention services developed in CAGI. These included new services, contracting with existing gang prevention and intervention service providers, and contracting with existing service providers who expanded their mission to include a gang focus. Several strategies were included in every site (education and outreach to youth, school-based prevention,

¹ Several evaluations of prevention, intervention and reentry programs, with control or comparison groups are underway but not yet available.

² The reference to 13 jurisdictions distinguishes the programs in Durham and Raleigh.

ex-offender outreach, and substance abuse treatment). The next most common were skills building services including employment and educational programs that were found in 11 of the 13 CAGI jurisdictions followed by vocational training programs in 10 sites. Nine jurisdictions included truancy reduction, clergy outreach, and youth street workers. Just under half the sites included neighborhood development programs and three jurisdictions developed an outreach program through the trauma center. The other category included programs such as peer mentoring, tattoo removal, and cognitive decision-making programs.

- Reentry tended to be the most difficult and challenging program component for most of the sites. It took longer to develop this component than was the case for gang enforcement and prevention. Most of the sites had not met their target for reentry clients served as of 2010, though most had reached or were approaching their targets by mid-2011.
- Focus groups and interviews conducted with CAGI reentry clients in Cleveland and Milwaukee revealed that most participants believed the reentry program was positive. Benefits of the reentry program were mentioned across both sites among participants who reported that the initiative resulted in job leads and placement and increased follow-up by a supportive network of people. However, a minority of participants were less positive and provided accounts that revealed several problems, including participants' perception that program coordinators and staff failed to keep promises, classes did not fit their needs, and the instructors spoke down to inmates and were unable to identify with them.
- Although the partnerships established was considered one of the key accomplishments of CAGI, in several jurisdictions there were problems in gaining the commitment and participation of specific organizations. In some places this involved local law enforcement, the local prosecutor, or a federal law enforcement partner. In several jurisdictions it was difficult to engage the school district.
- One recommendation from CAGI officials, with an eye toward overcoming the challenges of establishing effective partnerships and getting all three program components operating simultaneously and in a coordinated fashion, was that federal funding for a program like CAGI be provided in stages. The initial stage would be a planning phase that would allow for problem analysis, intelligence gathering, and partnership building. Given the success of this phase, stage two would then involve programmatic funding to support actual implementation. The officials believed that this type of planning stage would build the capacity for more timely and coordinated implementation of all three components (enforcement, prevention, reentry) that, in turn, would be more likely to generate gang crime reduction. Similarly, training and technical assistance to build capacity for reliable and consistent measures of gang crime and gang enforcement would likely contribute to stronger gang prevention programs and enhanced evaluations of such programs.

Key Findings – Impact on Violent Crime

- Most of the CAGI jurisdictions reported declines in crime in either their CAGI target site or for the city as a whole. The difficulty in interpreting these reports is that most U.S. cities experienced a decline in violent crime during the same period. An additional

challenge is that the CAGI reports of crime decline tend to rely on different types of crime incidents.

- One of the key challenges is that most of the CAGI jurisdictions do not systematically collect gang crime data. Given the connection between gang crime and violent crime, the impact analysis focused on violent crime trends.
- For the assessment of impact a cross-city comparison of violent crime trends from 2002 to 2009 was conducted. The rationale of the analysis is that if CAGI had an impact on gang crime it should be observed in violent crime trends in these cities compared to other U.S. cities.
- The cross-city analysis compared all 18 CAGI cities with the trend in crime in 249 comparable U.S. cities (total N=267). These consisted of all cities over 100,000 population in 2000 (11 CAGI cities and 241 non-CAGI cities), seven smaller Pennsylvania cities that were CAGI sites and eight comparable smaller Pennsylvania cities that were not part of CAGI. The city data included population size, concentrated disadvantage, and population density, factors known to influence levels of violent crime.
- The analysis compared CAGI cities with non-CAGI cities taking into account the timing of the implementation of CAGI and measures of law enforcement implementation, research integration, and prevention implementation, as well as a composite measure of implementation based on these three dimensions.
- Overall, the CAGI cities experienced a larger decline in violent crime than the comparison cities after the implementation of CAGI but the difference was not statistically significant when controlling for concentrated disadvantage and population density.
- When a measure of the level of implementation of enforcement was included in the analysis, the high enforcement CAGI cities experienced a 15 percent decline in violent crime and the difference was statistically significant. The results for research integration, prevention, and the composite measure of implementation did not indicate significant impact on the trend in violent crime.
- The CAGI cities were then compared to a sub-sample of cities based on a propensity matching approach that resulted in a comparison group of cities most similar to the CAGI sites in terms of the level of violent crime in the years prior to CAGI. The results were similar, when controlling for the level of enforcement implementation, the high enforcement CAGI sites experienced a significant reduction in violent crime.
- The 18 CAGI cities were then compared based on the level of federal prosecution for gun crime. The results revealed that the cities with high levels of federal gun prosecution experienced significantly significant reductions in violent crime.
- In summary, using both the measure of enforcement implementation as well as the measure of federal gun prosecution indicated that with greater enforcement there was a statistically significant reduction in violent crime.
- The next stage of the analysis involved ARIMA time series analyses of the trend in violent crime within five of the CAGI cities. The cities included Cleveland, Dallas, Milwaukee, Oklahoma City, and Rochester.
- All of the cities experienced declines in violent crime within their CAGI target areas. In some cases these were statistically significant but in others they were not.

- Cleveland's target areas experienced a 16 percent decline, although the decline did not attain statistical significance. During this same period, the remainder of the city experienced no change in violent crime thus suggesting a possible CAGI impact.
- Dallas experienced a 25 percent in their target areas. This was a statistically significant reduction but was difficult to interpret because the city as a whole experienced a 22 percent reduction in violent crime. This could mean that Dallas's CAGI coupled with related enforcement activities (PSN and hotspot policing) had an impact in both the target area and citywide. It is also consistent with some other factor influencing both CAGI sites and the city.
- Milwaukee's target areas experienced a 21 percent decline in violent crime that was statistically significant ($p < .10$).
- Oklahoma City experienced a slight decrease in its target area (-3.5%) although it was not a statistically significant reduction.
- Rochester experienced a 13 percent decline in its target area. Similar to Milwaukee this approached statistical significance ($p = .107$). It compared to a citywide decline of seven percent that was not statistically significant.
- A relatively crude cost-benefit analysis was conducted using the homicide reduction observed in two of the high enforcement sites (Cleveland and Dallas). These two sites experienced an annual decline of 14.5 homicides (combined) in the CAGI target areas comparing pre-intervention and post-intervention years. The reduction of 14.5 homicides in the CAGI target areas of these two cities generated an estimated \$14.9 million (tangible cost savings) to \$42.6 million (total costs) in savings. This for an investment of \$5 million in these two cities. Although questions can be raised about whether CAGI produced these reductions in the target areas, the cost savings are also likely to be under-estimates because they are based on cost savings using 1990s estimates and that do not include the costs of the operation of the criminal justice system. Similarly, they do not include cost savings from potential reductions in other violent crimes or in reductions that may have occurred in other CAGI cities.
- In summary, the within city analyses of the target areas demonstrated declines in the rate of violent crime but the declines did not consistently attain statistical significance and was difficult to interpret given more modest declines in the city trend in violent crime. The findings were consistent with two competing explanations. First, CAGI had an impact and the benefits of CAGI diffused to other parts of the city. Second, some other factor was influencing crime reduction in both the target areas and the city as a whole. This second interpretation is difficult to explain given the consistently larger decrease in the target areas but must be considered, particularly when many of the declines did not attain statistical significance. The cross-city analyses indicated that CAGI resulted in a decline in violent crime when controlling for the level of enforcement. When the cross-city and within-city analyses are coupled, the overall results suggest an impact of CAGI on violent crime when taking into account the level of enforcement.

Interpretation, Policy Implications, and Recommendations

Perhaps the key overall finding is the finding that when enforcement implementation was included in the analysis, that the cities experiencing high levels of enforcement witnessed statistically significant declines in violent crime. This was true based on both the enforcement

composite measure of strategies deployed and key enforcement partnerships and by the level of federal gun crime prosecution. The fact that the measure of prevention implementation did not relate to violent crime trends likely reflects that prevention impact is measured in the long-term as opposed to the more immediate impact of enforcement.

The other key finding were the consistent reports by CAGI officials that CAGI had resulted in greatly enhanced coordination, communication, and collaboration; on comprehensive strategies that linked enforcement, prevention, and reentry; and on new partnerships and new services delivered to active gang members and those believed to at-risk for involvement in gangs. Our site visits and interviews consistently suggested that there was a high level of commitment in these sites, that new services were indeed being delivered, and that “business as usual” had changed in terms of the enforcement and prevention of gang crime.³

Given the observed implementation challenges, as well as the above-noted problem with the lack of reliable gang crime measures in most of the CAGI cities, several recommendations arise. The recommendations are reinforced by similar findings in earlier large-scale gang intervention projects funded by the Office of Justice Programs. First, funding for capacity building, including support to local police departments for the collection of reliable gang crime data, could assist overcome implementation challenges as well as provide a foundation for more systematic evaluations.⁴ Second, local sites would benefit from a planning period, particularly for partnership building between criminal justice agencies and public and private organizations and community groups involved in prevention and intervention.

Methodological Limitations

As noted above, one of the key limitations is the inability to have consistent and reliable measures of gang crime and gang enforcement activity. Among the CAGI sites only Chicago and Los Angeles, with their long history of gang activity and enforcement have consistent measures of gang crime. Several of the other cities are now collecting gang crime but could not provide pre-intervention gang data. Several of the other cities attempted to collect gang crime data as part of the CAGI initiative but informed us they did not consider the data reliable and valid indicators of gang crime (and often did not collect gang crime data outside the target area). In terms of gang crime, perhaps the availability of gang crime data for impact assessment would have yielded more evidence of an impact of CAGI on crime.

An additional limitation related to the ability to provide data on gang enforcement. To its credit, the Department of Justice asked the CAGI sites to provide performance data on a variety of indicators related to enforcement (e.g., gang arrests and prosecutions), prevention (e.g., youth served in various programs, program completions), and reentry (e.g., clients served, program completions, failures). Our sense is that the CAGI task forces placed considerable emphasis on reporting such data. Despite these efforts, data reporting was very incomplete and inconsistent.

³ One site could stand as an exception to this pattern due to a major transformation of law enforcement services in the early years of the CAGI program but even here officials reported meaningful implementation following initial delay.

⁴ The National Gang Center and the National Youth Gang Center, both of which receive OJP funding, have developed resources to assist local communities assess their gang problem and to engage in strategic planning for comprehensive approaches to gang prevention and control. Technical assistance to local communities, particularly grant recipients, could likely address many of the implementation and evaluation issues that arose in the CAGI programs and in the research.

It was impossible to compare dosage levels across the sites based on these metrics. It may be that if the field reaches a stage where such data could be reliably reported that more meaningful implementation dosage measures could be constructed that would allow for a more complete test of the impact of these initiatives on gang crime.

Similarly, we were unable to construct meaningful comparison groups to test the effect of prevention and reentry programs in any of the sites (several evaluations are underway but results are not available). Several of the sites reported low levels of recidivism for CAGI reentry clients. This is a promising finding. However, in the absence of comparison data it is impossible to discern whether this reflects a program effect or whether it indicates self-selection and more motivated clients.

Implementation Limitations

Although we noted the evidence of meaningful implementation across the sites, this does not mean that implementation was without challenge. Although most of the sites had prior relationships among the participating law enforcement and criminal justice agencies, particularly through PSN, the prevention, intervention, and reentry components often meant new collaborations and partnerships. One of the consequences is that it took quite a bit of time to get all three components operating at the same point in time. In nearly all of the sites, enforcement moved forward rapidly but it took longer to implement the prevention and reentry components. Given the long-term nature of prevention effects, and the time it took to meet targets for numbers of reentry clients (for most sites this was 100 clients), it may have simply taken most of the CAGI program period to actually have a comprehensive gang enforcement and prevention program implemented. Perhaps when viewed over a long time period the violent crime reduction impact in these cities will become more apparent.

A similar implementation challenge was noted in the one site that was able to produce risk assessment data. This analysis indicated that although the prevention programs were able to serve youths in-need, they were not serving the youths most at-risk for gang involvement. In neighborhoods where most youths are in-need, this may be a logical outcome but it may also limit the impact of gang prevention programs. The local site used these data to revise plans for identifying youth at-risk but the impact of these program revisions was impossible to measure in the current evaluation.

This point about the challenge of implementing a comprehensive strategy was reinforced by many CAGI task force officials. When asked for recommendations for improving the program many officials talked about providing a time period that would allow for planning, problem analysis, and establishing relationships among partners. Following this planning period, support for implementation of a data-driven, strategic plan would occur. Perhaps such a phased process would speed up the implementation of all three program components and increase the likelihood of measured crime reduction impact.

Related to these observations, as the CAGI initiative moved forward in time the financial crisis and recession occurred. In our last round of interviews officials talked about reductions in law enforcement and social services either occurring or being planned. This may have limited the impact of CAGI. However, these same economic pressures were apparent in other U.S. cities as well and thus were unlikely to have affected the comparative analysis of violent crime trends in U.S. cities.