

The author(s) shown below used Federal funds provided by the U.S. Department of Justice and prepared the following final report:

**Document Title: Project Safe Neighborhoods Case Study Report:
Southern District of Alabama (Case Study 10)**

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Document No.: 241728

Date Received: April 2013

Award Number: 2002-GP-CX-1003

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Project Safe Neighborhoods Case Study Report: Southern District of Alabama

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March 2007

PSN Case Study Report #10

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U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs
810 Seventh Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20531

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This project was supported by Grant #2002GP CX1003 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. The Project Safe Neighborhoods Case Study Series has benefited from the support, assistance, and comments of John Irving, Lois Felson Mock, Robyn Thiemann, and members of the Firearms Enforcement Assistance Team (FEAT) of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Foreword

In 2001 the Bush Administration made the reduction of gun crime one of the two major priorities of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), along with defeating terrorism and enhancing homeland security. The vehicle for translating this goal 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 United States 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 Ceasefire Program and DOJ's Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative (SACSI). Those elements are: partnerships, strategic problem solving, outreach, training and accountability.ⁱ

The strategic problem-solving component of PSN was enhanced through grants to local researchers to work in partnership with the PSN task force to analyze local gun crime patterns, to inform strategic interventions, and to provide feedback to the task force about program implementation and impact. At the national level, PSN included a grant to a research team at the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University (MSU) to provide support to the strategic problem-solving component as well as to conduct research on PSN implementation and impact. As part of its research role, MSU has produced a series of strategic case studies of PSN interventions that have emerged in a number of jurisdictions across the country.ⁱⁱ The current report is part of a second series of studies focused on implementation of PSN in particular districts.

These site-specific case studies are intended to provide information about how PSN has been structured and implemented in different jurisdictions. PSN is a national program tailored to address varying gun crime patterns in local jurisdictions. One of the key roles of the research partner is to analyze these patterns to help inform the PSN task force. The local nature of PSN, however, makes it important to examine implementation and impact at the local level. Consequently, this series of site-specific cases studies addresses these issues.

The local nature of the national PSN program also creates challenging evaluation issues. Whereas some components of PSN (e.g., coordination through U.S. Attorney's Office; national media campaign; inclusion of research partners and community engagement partners) are common across the country, other components are locally driven (e.g., specific target areas, intervention strategies). Additionally, there is significant variation across the various PSN districts in terms of the timing of PSN implementation. It appears that in districts with existing federal-state-local programs focused on gun crime, the implementation of PSN often occurred at a quicker pace than was the case in districts where new relationships focused on gun crime had to be forged. Similarly, where research partners had established relationships with local criminal justice agencies the integration of research tended to occur more rapidly.

These characteristics raise a number of thorny evaluation issues. For example, the national dimensions of PSN make it difficult to identify comparison sites to assess the impact of PSN. Similarly, the multiple components of PSN make it difficult to generalize across all PSN districts in terms of the nature and intensity of PSN intervention strategies. For example, in some districts, PSN has meant a significant increase in federal prosecution of gun crime cases coupled with a communication strategy of a deterrence-based message. This reflects a Project Exile-type strategy. In other districts, research helped isolate particular target areas and

dimensions of gun violence (e.g., gangs, drug market locations) and resulted in focused interventions targeted at these dimensions. This reflects a SACSI-type strategy.

Given this variation across districts, as a first step in the national research program, a series of site-specific case studies is being conducted. Having decided on this approach, the first challenge was on choosing districts for study. The main criterion for selection was a sense that key components of the PSN strategy had been implemented in a meaningful fashion and had been in operation for a sufficient period to potentially affect levels of gun crime. The MSU research team has reviewed multiple indicators in an effort to identify districts meeting these criteria. These include district reports to the Department of Justice (DOJ), interviews with PSN project coordinators and PSN research partners, and review of data and project reports submitted to DOJ. From these sources, districts have been nominated for a possible case study based on:

- Evidence of implementation of PSN strategies (e.g., increased federal prosecution, joint prosecution case review processes, incident reviews, offender notification meetings, chronic violent offender programs, targeted patrol, probation/parole strategies, gang strategies, prevention, supply-side strategies, etc.)
- Evidence of new and enhanced partnerships (local, state, federal; community, etc.)
- Integration of research partners and/or evidence of research-based strategies
- Meaningful implementation for a sufficient time period to allow assessment of impact
- Sufficient base-rate levels of gun crime to allow assessment of impact

In effect, we employ these dimensions to ask: Is gun crime being addressed differently in this district based on one or several of the PSN core components?

For districts meeting these criteria, we then sought districts representing different regional and demographic dimensions (e.g., region of country, large city, medium city, rural jurisdictions) and with different local histories of federal, state, local relationships and involvement of researchers. The initial three case studies reflect these criteria. The Middle District of Alabama reflects a small U.S. Attorney's Office whose largest city is relatively small.

Table 2: Gun crime trend data- City of Mobile

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Homicide (total)	14	39	34	18	22	32
Aggravated assault with a firearm	135	121	113	78	92	145
Robbery with a firearm	497	487	432	374	347	348

To assess the significance of these trends, interrupted time series using autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) models were employed to analyze the impact of PSN on gun violence in Mobile. This type of analysis is considered one of the most powerful evaluation tools because it can take into account trends in crime prior to the intervention point and assess the significance of any change in levels of crime following the intervention.

Eight models were constructed to investigate the effect of the PSN intervention on several aspects of gun violence. The dependent variables were as follows: 1) total gun crimes (assault with a gun, discharging a firearm, ex-felon in possession of a firearm, homicide with a gun, menacing with a gun, no pistol permit, sex crimes (rape and sodomy) with a gun, robbery with a gun and shooting into a car or residence); 2) total violent crime with a gun (assault with a gun, homicide with a gun, sex crimes-i.e. rape and sodomy) with a gun and robbery with a gun); 3) total homicides with a gun; 4) total sex crimes with a gun (rape and sodomy); 5) total robberies with a gun; 6) total assault with a gun; 7) total menacing with a gun; and, 8) total gunshot trauma admissions.^x

Independent Variables

The hypotheses constructed were straightforward. The PSN program, based on case screening, increased federal prosecution, and the media campaign, should result in a decrease in gun-related crime and gunshot trauma admissions. Thus, we modeled the impact of the intervention on the variance in eight dependent variables. To control for overall rises or declines in crime pre- and post-intervention, we created a property crime variable (see above). The

intervention/interruption was operationalized as a dummy variable. The start date for the intervention was set at August 2002. This was approximately four months after the announcement by the Mobile Police Department of Operation Ice. For gun crime models this provided us with fifty-five months of pre-intervention data and forty-five months of post-intervention data. For the gunshot trauma model we had thirty-one months of pre-intervention data and forty-five months of post-intervention/interruption data.^{xi}

Descriptive Statistics

Table 3: Pre- and Post- Intervention Means (through August 1, 2006)

	Pre-intervention Mean	Post-intervention Mean	% change
Total Gun Crime	130.04	100.49	-29.55
Violent Crime w/Gun	52.02	39.94	-12.08
Homicide w/Gun	1.65	1.65	0
Sex Crime w/Gun	.65	.79	+14
Robbery w/Gun	39.51	29.81	-9.7
Assault w/Gun	13.44	10.56	-2.88
Menacing w/Gun	36.04	25.67	-10.37
Gunshot Trauma Admission	11.10	8.76	-2.34
Property Crime	681.42	687.40	+5.98

Table 3 summarizes the pre- and post-intervention means for the seven gun crime categories, gunshot trauma unit admissions, and property crimes. The pre- and post-intervention means for all of the gun crime categories, except for homicide with a gun and sex crimes with a gun, decreased when comparing the two periods. In contrast, the property crime mean increased in the period after the Operation Ice/PSN program was initiated, providing preliminary support for the idea that the decrease in gun crime was not a reflection of overall declines in crime.

Findings: ARIMA Analysis

ARIMA models were calculated independently for each of the dependent variables according to the previously described analytic strategy. We applied an intervention component that assumed a four-month delay (following the April 2002 roll out of Operation Ice) in the effects of the PSN program. Thus, our interruption was set at August 2002. This assumes an immediate deterrent effect after the interruption date.

Table 4 summarizes the results of the ARIMA analysis of the eight models.^{xii} With the exception of sex crimes with a gun, all the coefficients were negative suggesting a decline in gun crime. The PSN intervention, after controlling for property crime, had a significant effect in four crime categories (total gun crime, all violent crime with a gun, robberies with a gun and all assaults with a gun) and in gunshot trauma admissions. There was no reduction in sex crimes and the reduction in homicides and menacing was not statistically significant.

Total gun crime,^{xiii} after the implementation of PSN, decreased on average by about 26 incidents per month, after controlling for property crime; violent crime with a gun,^{xiv} decreased on average by about 16 incidents per month, after controlling for property crime; and robbery with a gun decreased on average by about 11 incidents per month after controlling for property crimes. Additionally, gunshot trauma admissions, representing the number of patients admitted to the local trauma center (i.e., University of South Alabama Hospital) for gunshot wounds, decreased on average by about 2 incidents per month after controlling for property crimes. Thus, the data suggest that the SDAL PSN intervention had an impact on the level of gun crime in Mobile and that this held when contrasted with the trend in property crime.

Table 4: ARIMA Findings (through August 1, 2006)

Gun Violence Type	ARIMA Model			Intervention	Property Crime	F	R-Square
	p	d	q				
Total Gun Crime	0	1	1	-26*	.05*		
All Violent Crime w/ gun	0	1	1	-16*	.04*		
All Gun Homicides	0	0	0	-.027	.003*	1.96	.04
All Sex Crimes	0	0	0	.139	0	.240	.005
All Robberies w/gun	0	1	1	-.11*	.03*		
All Assaults w/gun	1	0	0	-2.57*	-.02		
Total Menacing w/gun	1	0	0	11			
Gunshot Trauma Unit Admissions	0	1	1	-6	-.002		
	0	0	0	-2*	.003	3.76*	.09

*p<.05

Summary

Leadership

One of the key factors that makes the Southern District of Alabama stand out from some of the other districts is the leadership provided by the Mobile Police Department Chief (now county sheriff) in cooperation with the U.S. Attorney. Additionally, the three USAs from the three federal districts in Alabama had agreed upon a single, statewide Alabama ICE message. Project Safe Neighborhoods was a priority across the state. The local police Chief took it upon himself, again in collaboration with the USAO, to spearhead the Alabama ICE efforts in his city. Not only did he use some of his department's funding to get the media campaign started, he also implemented changes within his department to encourage change with the way gun cases were

being handled both locally and federally. And, once things were up and running smoothly within the department he allowed his Gun Coordinator to work with the USAO and ATF to train other departments in the Southern District.

Task Force Structure

Like many small districts, a traditional task force structure was not going to work in the Southern District of Alabama. Instead, the Southern District of Alabama maintained a loose task force structure and focused their efforts in Mobile. The key position came to be the Gun Coordinator within Mobile Police Department. The initial focus of Alabama ICE was in Mobile and then later expanded to include Brewton and Selma.

Partnerships

The change in the way gun crime cases were handled both locally in Mobile, throughout the district, and federally could not have been done without effective partnerships. The MPD partnered closely with the USAO and ATF to screen all gun crime cases, identify cases eligible for federal prosecution, and ultimately increase significantly the number of gun crime cases prosecuted federally. Having established a strong PSN program in Mobile, the USAO reached out to smaller police departments and district attorney offices through their LECC as well as by conducting gun crime related trainings with MPD and ATF. Similarly, the partnership with the United Way and the middle and northern districts of Alabama led to a coordinated media campaign throughout the state.

Challenges

One of the major challenges for the research partner involved data collection. This is not an uncommon challenge across PSN sites. Despite the desire to collect and use data from across

the district, the research partner was forced to concentrate on Mobile for evaluation purposes due to the nature of the data sources. Given the concentration of gun crime in Mobile, this was not a major obstacle for the inclusion of research in the PSN initiative.

Another challenge not uncommon to other districts and projects relates to turnover. The Southern District of Alabama experienced the loss of two major players within PSN. First, the United States Attorney and second the Chief of the Mobile Police Department. However, these changes do not appear to have negatively affected the day to day operations of PSN as the program was well-established and the new USAO and Chief of Police were supportive. Additionally, the former chiefs move to the Sheriff's Department brought on an additional collaborating law enforcement agency to the PSN task force.

Conclusion

As was found in a previous study of the Middle District of Alabama^{xv}, the PSN program in the Southern District of Alabama can be described as a Project-Exile type initiative drawing on both PSN core principles and the interventions developed in Richmond, Virginia's Project Exile.^{xvi} The Southern District was also characterized by a strong commitment to PSN by the leadership within the Mobile Police Department, the U.S. Attorney's Office, and ATF.

Given the concentration of gun crime in Mobile, within specific areas of Mobile, and among chronic offenders, and given the perception of a lack of credible sanctions within the state court and prison system, the PSN task force decided to focus on increasing federal prosecution of gun crime offenders. To ensure that gun crime cases received appropriate screening and prioritization, new partnerships were created between MPD, USAO, and ATF. Federal prosecution of gun crime cases were made a priority within the USAO and, indeed, federal prosecutions increased significantly. The prosecution strategy was complemented by a public

media campaign based on the Alabama ICE message of increased certainty of punishment for felons in possession or illegally using a gun in a crime. Analysis of the pre- and post-implementation trends in total gun crime, violent crime with a gun, robberies with a gun, and assaults with a gun, all indicated a significant decline in these gun-related offenses following the implementation of PSN. Similarly, there was a statistically significant decline in hospital admissions for gunshot wounds. There was no significant change in homicides with a gun, sex crimes with a gun, or menacing with a gun, though all but sex crimes with a gun, a relatively rare event, witnessed a downward trend. The findings must be tempered due to the lack of a control site, the decline in gun crime occurred during a time that property crime in Mobile was increasing, thus lending support for the hypothesis that the PSN intervention had an impact on gun crime.

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Endnotes

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- ⁱ Background on PSN is available through Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2004; McGarrell, 2005; and at the Department of Justice's PSN website, www.psn.gov.
- ⁱⁱ See Decker et al., 2005; McDevitt et al., 2005; Klofas et al., 2005; and Bynum et al., 2005.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Comparable demographic and crime statistics were unavailable for the federal districts of Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Guam, and the Marinas Islands. All comparisons are based on the 90 remaining federal districts.
- ^{iv} All population data are based on the 2000 U.S. Census.
- ^v The exact population for the Southern District of Alabama is 790,130. Thus, we examined districts with a population of +/- 25 percent (e.g., districts with at least 592,600 and at most 987,660). Eleven judicial districts were included in this analysis.
- ^{vi} The district relied heavily on an ad whereby well-known attorney Johnny Cochran states that when it comes to an illegal gun crime, even he will not be able to get the defendant off.
- ^{vii} Comparable population data were unavailable for the federal districts of Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Guam, and the Marinas Islands. All comparisons are based on the 90 remaining federal districts.
- ^{viii} O'Shea (forthcoming).
- ^{ix} And, despite the efforts to implement PSN in other areas within the Southern District, the research partner found that it was too difficult to collect adequate crime data in other possible target cities.
- ^x Note that the dependent variables are not inclusive and exclusive. Some are subsets of other dependent variables. Doing so enables a comparison of effects between commonly considered offenses and combinations of offenses.
- ^{xi} In the gun crime models and the gunshot trauma model, note the data points exceed the 50 observation rule of thumb (Cook and Campbell, 1979: 228).
- ^{xii} Three of the eight models had ARIMA parameters of 0,0,0. The dependent variables, in these models, were not autocorrelated. The method of analysis in these models, thus, was OLS linear regression. In those models, the F statistic and R-square are reported.
- ^{xiii} That is, all categories in the Mobile Police Department database in which a gun was used in commission of the offense and those instances when a gun was in possession of an offender.
- ^{xiv} That is, homicide with a gun, rape with a gun, robbery with a gun, aggravated assault with a gun.
- ^{xv} See McGarrell et al., forthcoming.
- ^{xvi} For PSN core principles, see Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2004; McGarrell, 2005. For an evaluation of Project Exile, see Rosenfeld, Fornango, and Baumer, 2005.