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21st Century Policing: Cross-Site, Multi-Stakeholder Sentinel Event Review Project

NIJ 2016-IJ-CX-K005 | ***Special Report: Final Summary Overview***

Submitted by: Mary V. Gordon

Purpose of the project

The *21st Century Policing: Cross-Site, Multi-Stakeholder Sentinel Event Review (SER) Project* seeks to test and learn from the application of Sentinel Event Review methodology. The goal is to learn how SERs can be sustained by local law enforcement organizations when working in a multi-stakeholder environment.

Statement of the problem

Law enforcement agencies are facing a defining moment in addressing trust and legitimacy with the communities they serve. Trust between law enforcement officers and communities is essential to the safety of our citizens. Relationships between police and communities have, however, become increasingly strained, with reports of deadly events and wrongful convictions filling the television, newspapers, and the Internet. While the model of conducting internal investigations to determine blame and penalize the individuals involved has been used for years, a new paradigm to bring systemic change is increasingly being embraced. Historically used in other disciplines (such as medicine and aviation), Sentinel Event Reviews have been employed to understand organizational failures. The SER framework (Figure 1) is based on three underlying principles: It is nonblaming; key stakeholders (system-wide) participate; and it is a fluid, ongoing process. These steps can then be modified and adapted to a specific situation.

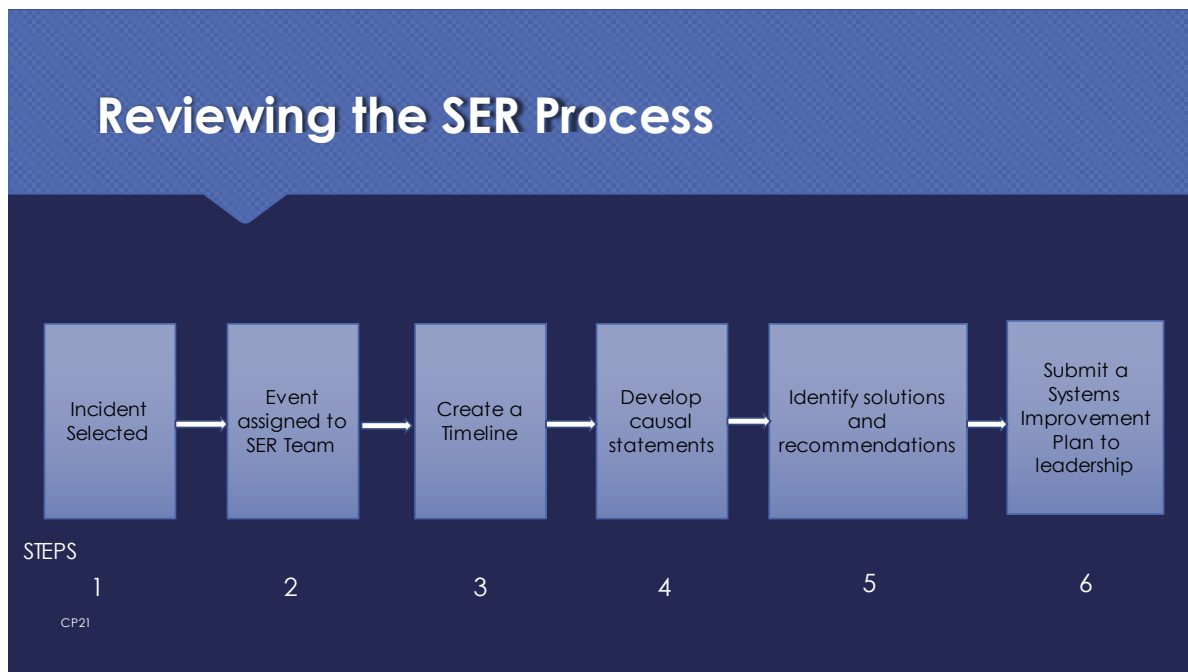


Figure 1. Steps of the Sentinel Event Review Process.

Major goal and objectives of the project

The major goal of the *21st Century Policing: Cross-Site, Multi-Stakeholder Sentinel Event Review Project* seeks to test and learn from the application of the Sentinel Event Review methodology in the law enforcement field. The President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing Final Report includes *Recommendation 2.3: Law enforcement agencies are encouraged to implement non-punitive peer review of critical incidents separate from criminal and administrative investigations.* The SER process also fits with the three components of community policing: *Partnerships, Problem Solving, and Organizational Change.*

Key staff/project partners

Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE)

The Principal Investigator (PI), Mary Gordon from Pacific Institute from Research and Evaluation (PIRE), manages the project and communication with the Project Officer. Mary is supported by the Co-PI, Sean Smoot (21st Century Policing, LLC), and a team of professional evaluators from PIRE with the

expertise needed to plan, implement, and effectively execute the tasks in the project. PIRE team members include David Collins, PhD (lead), Karen Friend, PhD, Kyra Fritz, PhD, and William Scarbrough, PhD.

Project partners

PIRE's project partners include:

21st Century Policing, LLC (21CP Solutions): Sean Smoot (Co-Principal Investigator) and Nola Joyce are with 21CP Solutions and provide capacity building and subject matter experience. Mr. Smoot is managing partner of 21CP Solutions and served as a police and public safety policy advisor to the Obama-Biden Presidential Transition Teams and was a member of President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. Ms. Joyce is the former Deputy Commissioner and Chief Administrative Officer for the Philadelphia Police Department and was previously the Deputy Director of Research and Development for the Chicago Police Department.

Strategic Applications International (SAI): Another PIRE partner, SAI, led by James and Colleen Cople, is a small business that has worked with the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and other Office of Justice Programs agencies on a range of criminal justice topics. SAI also served on the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, providing the consensus-building facilitation and logistics support for the Task Force.

Project design and methods

PIRE proposed to use a conceptual foundation (Systems Theory), and associated methodology (Dynamic Adaptation Process) to engage criminal justice stakeholders in *assessment, capacity-building, evidence-based strategy implementation, and a mixed-methods research design* to examine the process and impacts of SERs on policing, process improvement, and sustainability. The original design of the project included three separate police departments to serve as learning communities to design and carry out their SERs. A cross-site learning team was to be formed to maximize the sharing of knowledge

and experience. Each local team was to have a lead research partner (PIRE) and an SER technical coach (21CP Solutions) to support the project.

The project's design had a significant shift when two of the three police agencies were unable to participate. The project began with three agencies: Salt Lake City Police, New Haven Police, and Prince George's County Police Departments, all of whom had signed memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and two of which had different reasons for needing to decline.

After three onsite meetings, the Salt Lake City Police Department withdrew due to challenges and internal incidents in their department. They indicated that while they understood and appreciated the value of the project, their current staff levels did not allow for deviation from normal city business to participate in the SER project. The agency's representative stated that "The officers assigned to the committee met several times to map out a course for the SER project within our organization, while at the same time maintain the level of service Salt Lake City citizens expect of the police department. Unfortunately, we were unable to connect the two paths."

The project faced a different challenge with the New Haven Police Department (NHPD). The police chief that signed the MOU had resigned by the start of the project. The project met with agency staff of the new police chief numerous times from June through September and on a call in September. NHPD's grant manager shared that she had spoken to the new police chief and that "due to financial restraints, we will not be able to commit our personnel to this project."

The shift in design and resulting removal of the cross-site activities was discussed with the NIJ program officer. The decision was to continue with all the other project objectives with the third site, Prince George's County Police Department (PGPD). PGPD covers a countywide jurisdiction outside of Washington, DC, serving a population of 900,000, with a force of 2,000 officers. Prince George's County is home to a large number of federal facilities such as the Office of Homeland Security, Andrews Air Force Base, and the U.S. Secret Service Training Center and is an environment that crosses local, state,

and federal lines. PGPD continues to be aligned with the goal of the project, has completed one SER, and is currently using their SER work in a way that is very informative and has yielded successful outcomes. Appendices A and B, respectively, show the Fishbone Exercise (an exercise to facilitate the analysis of existing processes to determine opportunities for improvement) and Systems Improvement Plan from the PGPD's first SER. The department's first SER involved an incident of numerous all-terrain vehicle (ATV) and dirt bike riders unexpectedly converging into a mass ride. This event created unsafe conditions for citizens, tourists, and officers, and it disrupted highway safety and neighborhood and tourist area peace near a national tourist attraction.

The challenges we have faced have not impacted the quality of our work or swayed us from the objectives and goal of the project. These perceived setbacks have offered us additional insight and information to share with NIJ on a number of unforeseen challenges and potential solutions to addressing them. As we continue the completion of the project, the projects' design continues to be consistent with the original proposal of engaging criminal justice stakeholders in assessment, capacity-building, and evidence-based strategy implementation, using a mixed-methods research design to examine the process and impacts of Sentinel Event Reviews.

Based on the data collection, analysis, and key learnings from the reviews, the project is in the process of developing an SER Guidebook and Practitioner Tool Kit. The project has also yielded one academic, peer-reviewed journal article: "Sentinel event reviews in the criminal justice system: A review of the literature" published in *Criminal Justice Studies*.ⁱ The paper examines the available literature on Sentinel Event Reviews in the criminal justice system, borrowing heavily from other disciplines where they are well-established; examines the literature on organizational adoption; and allows the dissemination of best practices to benefit both law enforcement and the individuals they serve.

Data analysis

The overarching method for answering the research questions framing this project is grounded in Systems Theory and builds on the Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, and Sustainment (EPIS) conceptual framework. This conceptual framework features the Dynamic Adaptation Process (DAP)—a structured methodology for implementing evolving, evidence-based strategies. The DAP takes into account the multilevel context of community settings and provides appropriate expertise and feedback to make the SERs “implementation ready” and to guide and monitor model adaptations during the implementation period. We apply criminal justice policy and practice expertise via the SER teams (a group of members relevant to the SER such as law enforcement staff, policy and community members, researchers, and content experts) and combine qualitative methods with secondary analysis of available records and information. The DAP is based on the EPIS model, which segments implementation into four phases, adapted here for the SER process:

- ▶ Exploration—considering new approaches to carry out SER strategies.
- ▶ Preparation—planning to apply SER strategies.
- ▶ Implementation—ongoing planning, training, coaching, and use of SER strategies; and
- ▶ Sustainment—maintaining SER strategies over time.ⁱⁱ

Project findings

The findings from this project support the feasibility and success of Sentinel Event Reviews in the criminal justice system in certain situations. They also highlight the challenges of implementing what is a relatively nascent paradigm in a system that has not yet embraced the real-world constraints in implementing SERs. The SER process must be an effective and efficient process that results in meaningful insights. With the changes in site staffing, scheduling conflicts, and unforeseen events, the project has gained significant insight both from what has worked and also what has not worked. The

project highlights the possible obstacles to being inclusive in a culture that is often identified as “bureaucratic” in nature. Through the SER we were able to conduct in PGPD, we have been able to identify deficiencies and accolades, appreciate the values of data collection, and begin to look at activities and tasks through a more systemic lens. As PI, I have seen SER team members start meetings with contention toward another agency and, through conversations and an approach toward prevention (instead of blame), have seen the conversation shift toward increased communication and collaboration. Thus, if facilitated appropriately, SER discussions and meetings can produce honest, reliable, and significant information. Below is a summary of some of the findings since starting the project. The final report will include these in addition to any new findings through the second SER (still in development).

Finding 1: The importance of police agency support

Involvement of leadership staff: Because of the agency’s bureaucratic nature, the role of police leadership in selecting staff and supporting attendance at meetings is crucial. This project had a Major who attended the meetings and also would send follow-up letters to remind officers of meeting dates.

Importance of administrative support (liaison): The project also had liaison who worked with a Major from the PGPD. The liaison was a civilian employed by the Police Department under the research and planning office. She was extremely helpful in identifying appropriate staff, reaching out to other agencies, and sharing some of the particulars and nuances of the particular Police Department. She was proactive in identifying potential challenges and offering reliable and efficient options.

Finding 2: The importance of identifying the SER team and keeping the team intact

When identifying SER team members, it’s important to consider agencies outside of law enforcement such as court personnel, policy makers, and subject matter experts, as well as law enforcement and community members. In most, if not all, SERs there will be members who are opposing in view and perception of the particular sentinel event. Through the SER process, these

challenges should be addressed while keeping the discussion on system approaches and not personal failures.

The more important challenge an SER team faces is keeping the team intact. In federal agencies and police departments there are often personnel changes and staff turnover. These changes resulted in needing to make adjustments and review earlier activities. For example, the project had a significant personnel change when the PGPD Chief of Police resigned at the end of the first SER, requiring an introduction and education of the project to the new police chief. Fortunately, Chief Malik Aziz was familiar with SERs and participated on the task force on 21st century policing in 2015.

Finding 3: The importance of stakeholder engagement

Keeping law enforcement engaged is a difficult task because of the real-time activities and responsibilities of each department. This resulted in difficulties keeping a consistent level of engagement among the stakeholders. The project team worked with agencies to keep the meetings efficient and engaging by switching meetings from one 4-hour event to two 2-hour events. Another way to make meetings more efficient was to assign pre-reads to support a more effective meeting. The PIRE team often had to facilitate the start of the meetings to elicit engagement, rather than a more fluid conversation driven by the SER team.

Finding 4: The recognition of real-time schedules

During this project, Maryland police departments (of which PGPD is a component) had to respond to a national protest, insurgents on the U.S. Capitol, a presidential election, and most recently COVID-19. This placed a strain on available personnel. Though the activities and/or events might differ across police agencies and at varying times, it's important to recognize the need for flexibility in accommodating scheduling changes. PGPD has been very responsible in working with the project by identifying options in order to stay within the scope of the project as they respond to the shifts in their schedules.

Finding 5: The existence of data access/collection challenges

Data collection is always a challenge in research; however, for agencies such as police departments, often the cost and availability make the challenge more prominent. Below is an example of some of challenges identified from the project:

- ▶ Cross-jurisdictional challenges where offenders commit independent offenses in Maryland, Virginia, and DC, which don't show up on Maryland PGPD datasets
- ▶ Limited access to information from multiple-level court systems
- ▶ Sealed, expired, and expunged records (access challenge)

The access or lack of access to this information hinders appropriate activities, and, as a result, a crime occurring in one town may go undetected in a neighboring town. Police in some areas are now looking at a methodology called intelligence-led policing, which (in summary) through laptops or mobile computing officers can query cross-jurisdiction data authorized by their department. These and other findings open the door for future research opportunities, identified as supporting SERs.

Implications for criminal justice policy and practice in the United States

There is limited research available to determine how Sentinel Event Reviews can be successfully operationalized within a law enforcement agency. This project takes advantage of the resources and literature available and continues to use the information to address challenges and identify successes.

Culture of learning and transparency

The impact of the *21st Century Policing: Cross-Site, Multi-Stakeholder Sentinel Event Review Project* is the demonstration that SERs can be used to create a learning and transparent culture within the social context in which police operate. This approach encourages the participating police departments to allocate existing staff resources and support to ensure sustainability and success of the local teams. This includes support from outside agencies and local government agencies as well. The tools developed from the project (a Guidebook, a Practitioner Tool Kit, a published journal article on a

review of the available literature, and a manuscript of a case study in review) offer guidance for a culture of learning and are available and relevant to various audiences of police officers, police administration, policy and community leaders, and future researchers. The broader implication from the project and its tools is indicated by the need for continuous communication, dialogue, supportive research, and transparency.

SER replication as an efficient methodology

One of the challenges of the use of the SER in law enforcement is the perception and reality that it can be time consuming and controversial. This project identifies practices and is developing tools, templates, and strategies that clearly focus on processes for that result in a more efficient and effective way to produce meaningful results without prolonging the process.

Summary

The project has had successes and encountered challenges in completing the SERs; however, participants have noted an improved understanding of the challenges across agencies and communities and their impact on an SER—one of the first steps to understanding the benefits of system changes versus a more targeted individual explanation of errors. The hope of the project is also to develop and/or identify a group of early adopters who can use the tools developed with along with personal experience, to support other agencies.

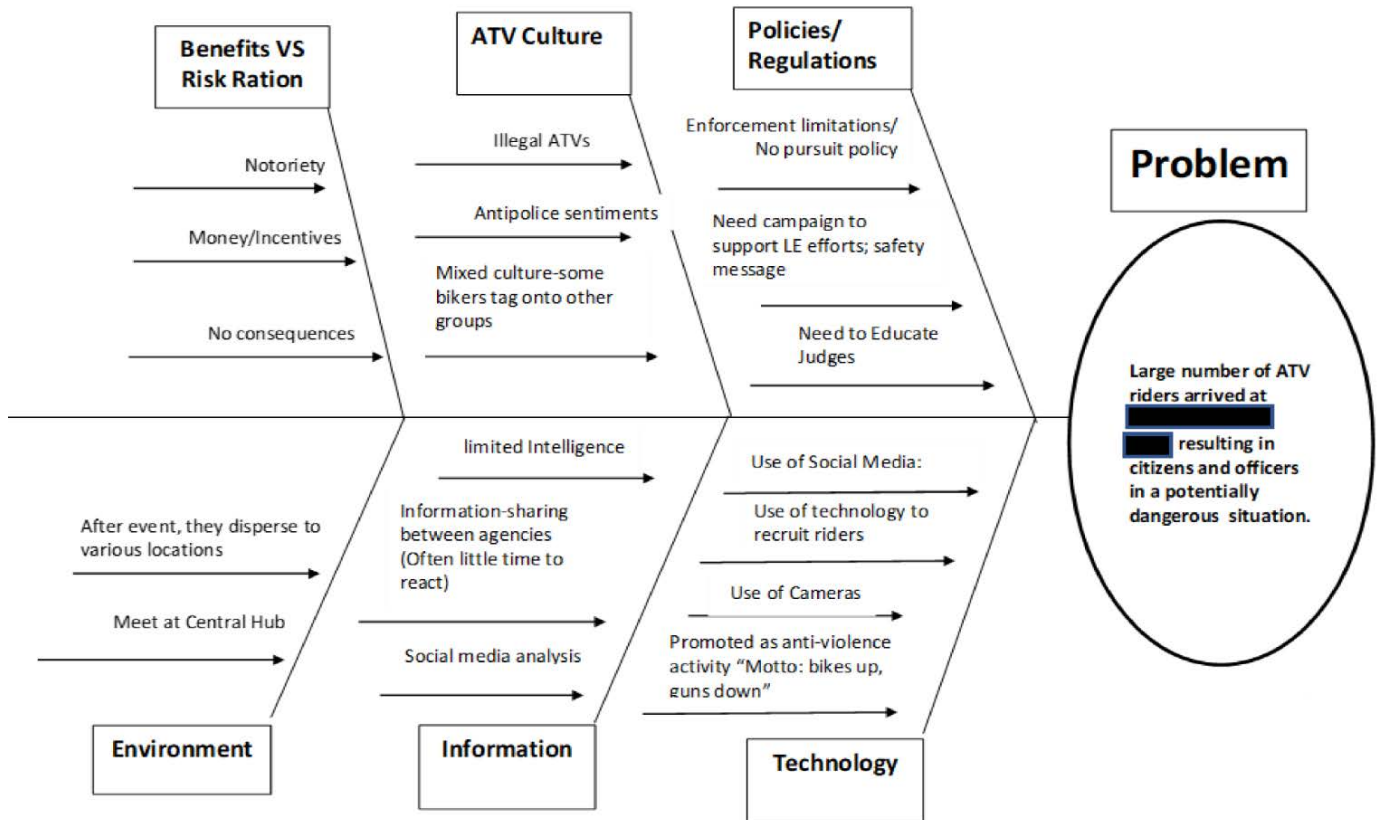
Endnotes:

ⁱ Friend, K. B., Gordon, M., Scarbrough, B., Collins, D., Fritz, K., Smoot, S., Copple, J., Copple, C., & Joyce, N. (2020). Sentinel event reviews in the criminal justice system: A review of the literature. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 33(4), 337-353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601x.2020.1741227>

ⁱⁱ Aarons, G. A., Hurlburt, M., & Horwitz, S. M. (2011). Advancing a conceptual model of evidence-based practice implementation in public service sectors. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, 38(1), 4–23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-010-0327-7>

Appendix A

Causal Analysis: Fishbone Exercise



Appendix B

Recommendations: Redacted Recommendations

Root Cause	Causal Statement	Recommendations
1. Risk vs. Benefit	The perceived risk of illegally riding an ATV does not outweigh the perceived benefits resulting in riders from varying backgrounds joining illegal ride and increasing the number of riders converging on the streets and in the neighborhoods.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1 Seize the ATVs as evidence and require proof of ownership for return. 1.2 Work with SA and Courts to use existing traffic laws. 1.3 Work with PIO and media relations to selectively publicize who is caught illegally riding ATV. 1.4 Explore the possibility of sending letters from the Chief to the homes and insurance companies of people caught illegally riding ATV. 1.5 Work with SA and Courts to increase the probability of convictions on offenses associated with illegally riding ATVs
2. Polices & Regulations	The policies governing enforcement and the consequences for illegally riding an ATV on the street limit the effectiveness of reactive policing and contributes to the boldness of riders and increased danger to others on the highway and in the neighborhoods.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1 Establish an enforcement and prosecution team to develop procedures and processes to increase the arrest and prosecution of illegal ATV riders. 2.2 Develop a protocol that outlines Patrol response to illegal ATV riders and response to ATV accidents. 2.3 Provide training and information to patrol supervisors and officers about expected response to illegal ATV rides and riders. 2.4 Develop a legislative strategy that enhances county and state laws around illegal ATV rides and riders. 2.5 Educate prosecutors and the courts about the harm illegal ATV rides cause.

Root Cause	Causal Statement	Recommendations
3. Information Gathering & Sharing	Limited pre-ride and during the ride information gathering and sharing within the department and with other departments contributed to the county being 'surprised' by the number of riders converging on the streets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1 Create a database identifying riders, their bikes, and contacts with police. 3.2 Explore the use of cameras to increase situational awareness and possible enforcement. 3.3 Expand the monitoring and sharing of information obtained from social media feeds. 3.4 Develop mechanisms to share information about riders and rides with Patrol.
4. Environment	Characteristics of the ATV—small, quick, all-terrain, unregistered vehicle—means traditional traffic control and enforcement are not effective and promote illegal rides.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.1 Use proactive tactics like preventing riders from converging on a designated meet-up location. 4.2 Deploy marked vehicles immediately upon learning of ATVs massing and along the most probable routes. 4.3 Work with the owners of locations where ATVs tend to gather prior to a ride to harden the environment—fencing, speed bumps, cameras, etc. 4.4 Establish a relationship and protocol with the Department of Transportation about using their traffic cameras to assist in situational awareness and enforcement.
5. ATV Culture	The ATV culture is characterized by an underground vibe, camaraderie, adventure, and flaunting the law, which contributes to enticing both hard-core and weekend riders to join in on rides.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5.1 Develop a marketing campaign that shows the negative and harmful side of illegal ATV rides. 5.2 Work with stakeholders like CAC, community advocates, and transportation to help reduce the tolerance for illegal ATV rides.
6. Technology	ATV riders and groups use social media and messaging apps to spread the word about the ATV culture and rides leading to more people being attracted to this subculture and participating in mass rides.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6.1 Use social media to counter the message of the ATV culture based on work done under number 1 and 5. 6.2 As part of the enforcement and prosecution work team determine how social media feeds may aid in arrest and prosecution. 6.3 Participate in ATV social media posts to point out dangers and risks. 6.4 Seek the help of others who may hear of plans for illegal rides and ask them to share information.