



Program Brief



Project Safe Neighborhoods: America's Network Against Gun Violence

Although U.S. violent crime rates have been declining steadily and are now at a 30-year low, gun violence, particularly homicide, continues to be a significant problem. Death by firearms accounted for 67 percent of all homicides in 2002.¹

To combat gun crime, in 2001 President George W. Bush created an aggressive, comprehensive gun crime reduction strategy called Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN). By linking federal, state, and local law enforcement, prosecutors, and community leaders, PSN provides a multifaceted approach to deterring and punishing gun crime. It represents a nationwide commitment to reduce gun crime by providing locally based programs with the tools and resources they need to succeed.

PSN (www.psn.gov) is committed to building effective federal, state, and local partnerships; using research tools to assist with guiding local strategies and measuring their impact; providing comprehensive training; conveying the initiative's priorities, message, and results to the community and the media; and building a strong and lasting coalition with citizens so they will be agents of change in their own communities.

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About BJA

The Bureau of Justice Assistance was established in 1984 as a component of the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. BJA provides leadership and resources to state, local, and tribal governments and communities to reduce crime, violence, and drug abuse and to strengthen the nation's criminal justice system. BJA provides this assistance through formula and discretionary grants, training and technical assistance, publications, and the BJA web site.

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Office of Justice Programs

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National and Local Cooperation

PSN is a partnership involving components of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ): the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, the U.S. Marshals Service (USMS), the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), the National Institute of Justice, the Executive Office for United States Attorneys (EOUSA), and the United States Attorneys' Offices. PSN also partners with national constituent organizations including the National District Attorneys Association, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC).

In addition to the federal and national partners, Michigan State University, American University, Hobson & Associates, and the American Probation and Parole Association provide training and technical assistance to PSN.

The U.S. Attorney in each of the 94 federal judicial districts, working side by side with local law enforcement and other officials as a task force, has tailored the PSN strategy to fit the unique gun crime problem in that district. Criminals who use guns are prosecuted under federal, state, or local laws, depending on which jurisdiction can provide the most appropriate punishment. Each district engages in deterrence and prevention efforts through community outreach and media campaigns and ensures that law enforcement and prosecutors have the training necessary to make the program work. Each U.S. Attorney has designated a PSN point of contact to serve as the project coordinator and help streamline communication among the PSN task force members and partners.

To complement the PSN efforts in each district, DOJ created the Firearms Enforcement Assistance Team (FEAT), which is composed of federal staff who have expertise in PSN's core elements. FEAT also assists the districts with their implementation efforts by acting as the single point of contact within DOJ to

address PSN inquiries from the federal judicial districts.

PSN is not a “one size fits all” program that is applied uniformly in all jurisdictions; rather, each local PSN task force designs its program by tailoring the five core elements of PSN to tackle its own unique gun crime problems.

PSN’s Five Core Elements

For PSN to be successful, five elements are essential: partnerships, strategic planning, training, outreach, and accountability.

Partnerships. Members of the 94 PSN task forces may include federal, state, and local agencies, including the U.S. Attorney who heads each task force; state and local prosecutors; special agents in charge from ATF, USMS, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); local and state chiefs of police; and community leaders. Each task force develops strategies to reduce gun crime and reviews and prepares gun cases for prosecution in the most appropriate forum and venue.

Strategic planning. Each PSN task force, assisted by a grant-funded research partner, creates a strategic plan tailored to address the specific dynamics of its crime problems. Plans are aimed at prosecuting violent gun offenders and intensifying federal gun law enforcement using state-of-the-art technology and intelligence-gathering techniques such as mapping crime, identifying hotspots, tracing seized crime guns, and using ballistics technology.

Training. Specialized training on current laws and trends that affect law enforcement is essential. PSN provides expansive and comprehensive training for federal, state, and local law enforcement officers and prosecutors. DOJ and its partners conduct regional cross training on firearm identification, safety, interdiction, trafficking, and tracing; federal and state

“If you use a gun illegally, you will do hard time.”

—President George W. Bush

firearm statutes; federal and state search and seizure laws; crime scene and evidence management; and strategic planning. U.S. Attorneys also are encouraged to conduct their own local and regional training programs.

Outreach. Community outreach and public awareness are essential to PSN’s success. U.S. Attorneys work with their local communities to increase awareness of PSN, promote community involvement, send a gun crime deterrent message, and work with citizens to develop a gun crime reduction strategy for the district, including appropriate crime prevention strategies that involve community members. To spread the word about gun crime reduction, an aggressive community outreach campaign is coupled with strong enforcement and prevention and education messages. PSN has made direct grants to districts and sponsored a national media campaign.

Outreach activities include producing and distributing literature, conducting mail campaigns, sponsoring local workshops, and producing public service announcements (PSAs), educational literature, crime prevention toolkits, billboard advertisements, press releases, and news articles. Media partners work with the local PSN task forces to identify local stakeholders, leverage the support of potential partners, identify resources, and engage members of the community in the PSN initiative.

PSN’s national PSA campaign, created by DOJ in partnership with NCPC and the Ad Council, began with the “Gun Crimes Hit Home” theme, which focuses on the consequences of using guns illegally. The first PSA, “Mothers,” was launched on September 27, 2003 and



Poster created for the PSN campaign for use in schools and communities.

portrays the pain of mothers who have lost their children to gun violence. A series entitled “Sentenced,” which focuses on the pain caused to families when a loved one commits a gun crime, was officially launched on January 26, 2004. The “Gun Crimes Hit Home” message also is being emphasized in print, television, and radio advertisements.

Accountability. U.S. Attorneys must continually review gun crime reduction efforts to measure PSN’s impact on reducing crime and its long-term effect. U.S. Attorneys regularly assess the effectiveness of their strategic plans and the emerging trends in their districts, and they provide semiannual progress reports to EOUSA. The reports allow the U.S.

Attorneys to describe fully both the gun crime problems in their districts and the strategies the PSN task force is employing to combat those problems.

PSN Funding

The Administration has devoted more than \$1 billion to PSN for fiscal years (FYs) 2001–2004. Funds are used for various objectives, including hiring and training new assistant U.S. Attorneys to work full time on gun crime prosecutions and new state and local prosecutors to work with federal law enforcement agencies on such cases, updating and automating state criminal history records, expanding ATF’s Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative and Integrated Violence Reduction Strategy, expanding ATF’s computerized ballistics technology, and creating a nationwide tracing system. In addition, Project ChildSafe, a separate program under PSN, distributes safety kits nationwide with cable-style gun locks and educational materials on safe gun storage.

BJA, a component of DOJ’s Office of Justice Programs (OJP), administers the PSN grant funding. In FY 2001, BJA initiated the Community Gun Violence Prosecution (GVP) Program to support the hiring of state and local prosecutors who are dedicated to prosecuting violent firearm-related crimes. Funding under this program was available to all state, county, city, and tribal public prosecutor offices, including state attorney general offices that have responsibility for prosecuting matters involving firearm-related violent crime. Under this program, 311 jurisdictions received grant awards to cover 80 percent of the salary and benefits costs up to \$40,000 for each of up to 4 state or local prosecutors for 3 years.

In FY 2002, BJA sponsored four new PSN grant programs. In the Research Partner/Crime Analyst and Media Outreach and Community Engagement programs, PSN task forces selected research and media partners to assist with local efforts. Project Sentry grants provided funding for juvenile-related programs. A Reducing Community Gun Violence open

solicitation funded innovative ideas in reducing gun violence.

- ◆ Research Partner/Crime Analyst grants support the strategic planning and accountability components of PSN. These grants allow local governments to collect and appropriately analyze accurate data to develop data-driven strategies to reduce gun crime. A research partner was selected for each of the 94 U.S. Attorney districts that will receive up to \$150,000 over 3 years.
- ◆ Media Outreach and Community Engagement grants provide resources to publicize a strict enforcement message, encourage citizens to work with law enforcement to address firearm-related crime in their communities, and promote gun safety at the local level. Similar to the research partner program, a media partner was selected for each of the U.S. Attorney districts that will receive up to \$170,000 over 2 years.
- ◆ Project Sentry grants assist selected communities in determining the extent and nature of juvenile gun offenses and gun violence and in finding the best approach to address the problem. Such approaches may include one or any combination of the following: identifying and investigating juvenile gun crimes, prosecuting juveniles who commit offenses using guns, prosecuting adults who supply illegal firearms to juveniles, or supervising juvenile gun users once they are adjudicated or convicted. Thirty-seven awards ranging from \$200,000 to \$1 million were stratified among counties that had high local gun-related and total juvenile violent crime rates at different population levels.
- ◆ The Reducing Community Gun Violence open solicitation funds innovative ideas to reduce gun violence in three different areas. Forty of these competitive grants were made with an average award of \$250,000 over 3 years.

In response to feedback from the field, the FY 2003 PSN program's funding allocation was changed. Instead of being awarded in separate grants for each

PSN component, the FY 2003 PSN funds were consolidated and distributed as block grants. That is, each district received a base allocation, and the remaining funds were distributed based on population. This new format provided each district's task force with more flexibility in determining how the money should be spent on gun violence reduction efforts at the local level. Based on the proportion of appropriated Project Sentry funds compared to all PSN funds, 29 percent of FY 2003 PSN funds were set aside for juvenile programs. To administer these funds, each district chose a fiscal agent to enter into subgrants or contracts with individual projects to carry out the individual components of the PSN task force strategy.

The FY 2004 PSN grant program will be administered in the same manner as the FY 2003 program. In addition, through the FY 2004 National PSN Community Engagement and Media Outreach Technical Assistance Program, BJA will fund specialized support to the 94 PSN task forces. Technical assistance (TA) will be provided by a national grant recipient through a combination of onsite and office-based TA and training and through the development and the dissemination of resource materials.

In 2004, BJA also is working with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to supplement the strategies of nine U.S. Attorneys' districts focused on the prevention, investigation, and prosecution of violent crime and drug crime in public and federally assisted housing, including Native American housing. BJA is coordinating this project with HUD and OJP's American Indian and Alaska Native Affairs Desk in an effort to increase attention on gun violence reduction in public housing in general and, where appropriate, in tribal population centers.

BJA and the PSN partners also offer a series of ongoing comprehensive training and technical assistance (see "Training" under "Five Core

Elements” for course examples). More than 11,000 PSN task force members have received training.

PSN Success Stories

The success of the PSN program is based on the cooperation of federal, state, and local agencies. Because of PSN, federal prosecutions of gun crime are at record levels; they have increased 68 percent from FY 2000 to FY 2003. In FY 2003, 93 percent of defendants were sentenced to some prison time; about 72 percent received sentences of at least 3 years. Descriptions of four successful PSN task forces appear below.²

Southern District of Indiana

The Southern District of Indiana has a strong PSN initiative that combines an innovative program—the Indianapolis Violence Reduction Program (IVRP)—with partnerships of federal, state, and local law enforcement and faith-based organizations. Through IVRP, the district has created a program of prevention and prosecution to deter felons from possessing firearms and ammunition. Through its faith-based approach, ministers and religious leaders have assisted with outreach and prevention efforts that have greatly enhanced the district’s interaction with the community, developed a ready network of support for families at risk of firearm violence, and provided unique opportunities to deliver the PSN message. These outreach efforts are directed to and through service-oriented and/or spiritually related organizations that work to improve the quality of life for the community.

Successful community outreach efforts focusing on PSN have been made in schools as part of a program called Educating Kids About Guns (EKG) and at events such as the Indiana Black Expo Summer Celebration Youth Summit and Breakfast with the Boyz and Breakfast with the Girlz, attended by 1,000 young men, women, boys, and girls. A youth scholastic basketball event delivered the PSN message. PSN participation in these events is designed to reach

individuals who are believed to be most at risk and affected by gun violence. A strong law enforcement message is delivered in conjunction with the message from community and faith-based organizations that there are alternatives to violence and that assistance is available.

In addition to the strong efforts focused on prevention and deterrence, federal prosecutions in this district have increased dramatically. Federal statistics for the Southern District of Indiana from FY 2000 to FY 2003 show an increase of 154 percent for gun crime prosecutions and an increase of 141 percent in the number of defendants prosecuted. In FY 2003, 84 percent of the convicted defendants were sentenced to prison terms of more than 3 years, and 61 percent were sentenced to prison terms of more than 5 years.

Although establishing concrete links between gun crime prosecution, prevention, and deterrence efforts and a decrease in violent crime requires long-term rigorous study, preliminary results are encouraging. According to the Indianapolis Police Department, the number of homicides in the high-crime, west district has decreased by 30 percent. From 29 in 2001, the number dropped to 20 in 2002 and 21 in 2003. Moreover, homicide figures remain well below the record-high levels that occurred in 1997 and 1998, prior to implementation of IVRP.

District of Massachusetts

Boston was one of the pioneers of PSN. Its Project Ceasefire helped to set the foundation on which PSN was built and expanded. The District of Massachusetts continues to implement PSN strategies that are tailored to address the issues facing its community. As part of its PSN initiative, the district has expanded its programs to bring the most successful elements of Project Ceasefire to other major cities in the district, including Brockton, Lowell, Springfield, Holyoke, Chicopee, New Bedford, and Fall River. District attorneys’ offices in these areas collaborate with the U.S. Attorney’s Office to discuss strategies for proactive investigations, to confer on

cases, and to refer firearm-related cases for potential federal prosecution when viable. Target cities also have been encouraged to identify hotspots of firearm violence and to use their data to design strategies to combat violence.

Recently, the District of Massachusetts teamed with its PSN media outreach partner, federal and state law enforcement agencies, and community-based service providers to launch a media campaign to target previously convicted felons. The campaign is meant to serve as a reminder to felons of the mandatory sentences faced if they are found in possession of firearms.

Other PSN programs aimed at helping individuals make good choices to remain law-abiding members of the community complement the media campaign. One such program is the Boston Reentry Initiative, in which offenders are assigned mentors to guide them in obtaining job training, substance abuse counseling, employment opportunities, and any other needed services. The severity of the penalty for offenders in possession of firearms is also reiterated. According to preliminary findings, individuals who stay active in the program have a lower rate of recidivism than would be expected for this population.

Two other collaborative initiatives take proactive approaches to preventing gun crime. Through Operation Nightlight, state probation officers and police officers make unannounced home and community visits to monitor high-risk probationers to ensure compliance with probation conditions. This initiative provides more interactive relationships between probation officers and probationers, strengthens cooperation between police and probation officers, and serves notice to the community that the police and probation officers are serious about their mission. Operation Homefront teams clergy with police to visit more than 600 at-risk minors and their families per year with the goal of preventing future

"Together in coordination with law enforcement and communities across America, we can help break the deadly link between guns and crime and keep gun-wielding criminals off our streets and out of our neighborhoods."

—Attorney General John Ashcroft

criminal behavior. The participation of clergy, who are often known to the families and welcomed into their homes, encourages parents to see police as positive figures who sincerely want to help.

In addition to these strong efforts focused on prevention and deterrence, federal prosecutions in this district continue to dramatically increase. The District of Massachusetts has seen a 157 percent increase in prosecutions from FY 2000 to FY 2003. In FY 2003, 77 percent of convicted defendants were sentenced to prison terms of more than 3 years and 47 percent were convicted to terms of more than 5 years. Statistics show that in 2002, violent crime in the district reached its lowest level in 31 years.

Western District of Tennessee

The Western District of Tennessee has formed effective partnerships with the Memphis Police Department, the district attorney, ATF, and other state and local law enforcement in its efforts to implement the PSN initiative and target felons in possession of firearms or ammunition for federal prosecution. The district's PSN task force shows an impressive level of cooperation among all involved components. A dedicated Firearms Unit is composed of the PSN coordinator, three other federal prosecutors, and one state prosecutor. The unit has ensured that the most violent offenders are charged in federal court within

days of their arrest, while continuing to indict the remaining offenders in a timely manner.

The enforcement authorities of the PSN task force meet weekly to review information prepared by the Police Department's PSN unit on all arrests or citations in which a firearm was seized. This information is then cross-referenced and reviewed for prior felonies, related drug or violent crimes, and stolen or otherwise prohibited firearms. The Memphis Police Department has developed a computer database that allows all enforcement components of the PSN task force to access information for all PSN cases, enabling them to immediately identify recidivists or prior codefendants, with links to supplemental investigation reports. Indictment and disposition information in both state and federal courts is also available. Personnel who use the database praise it for allowing swift and easy access to shared information among the participating members of the PSN task force.

The cooperation within the Western District of Tennessee has led to a 407 percent increase in federal gun crime prosecutions since PSN's inception. In FY 2003, 76 percent of the convicted defendants were sentenced to prison terms of more than 3 years, and 58 percent were sentenced to more than 5 years. Firearm-related homicides fell by 16.4 percent from 2002 to 2003, and aggravated assaults committed with firearms fell by 10.7 percent.

District of Nevada

To focus on the dramatic increase in violent crime in Las Vegas, the District of Nevada has created Project EFFECT (Ex-Felon and Firearm Equals Conviction). Project EFFECT combines the efforts of ATF, state and local police, and the district attorney's office in the prosecution of felons in possession of firearms or ammunition.

Due to the district's makeup and geography, the U.S. Attorney's Office has two separate Project EFFECT programs. The first program is tailored to meet the needs of Las Vegas, which has a largely urban population, and the second program focuses on southern Nevada and is tailored to a more rural population. Weekly firearm meetings in southern Nevada bring together attendees from the U.S. Attorney's Office, the Clark County District Attorney's Office, ATF, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD), and more recently, officials from the Henderson Police Department and the North Las Vegas Police Department. Firearm cases that have occurred during the week are discussed and determinations are made as to the best manner of prosecution. The LVMPD gun crimes unit also has begun implementing a community outreach program that includes informing residents in the areas with the most gun crime about increased firearm enforcement and prosecution. This outreach is done through word of mouth by patrol officers and detectives at meetings of community, business, and faith-based groups.

As a result of these efforts, federal gun crime prosecutions in the District of Nevada have steadily increased. From FY 2000 to FY 2003, there has been a 160 percent increase in gun crime prosecutions, with an increase of 163 percent in the number of defendants prosecuted. In FY 2003, 59 percent of convicted defendants were sentenced to prison terms of more than 3 years, and 30 percent were sentenced to prison terms of more than 5 years.

Since October 2001, a very efficient and organized effort to combat violent crime has been underway in the Clark County/Las Vegas Metropolitan area. A successful PSN task force partnership has led to significant increases in both state and federal gun crime prosecutions, and its work has attracted the

attention of felons in the Las Vegas area. The word on the street is that if a felon possesses a firearm, his/her case will be thoroughly reviewed for the possibility of federal prosecution.

In these 4 and in the other 90 federal judicial districts throughout the country, PSN is making America's neighborhoods safer by supporting local efforts to vigorously enforce gun laws, prosecute offenders, and prevent and deter gun crime.

Notes

1. Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2003, *Crime in the United States 2002*, Uniform Crime Reports, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation.
2. The online HTML and PDF versions of this report present information on the Western District of Tennessee that is not presented in the print version.