



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

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Juvenile Gun Violence and Gun Markets in Boston

A Summary of a Research Presentation by David M. Kennedy, Harvard University

Like other major cities in the United States, Boston is grappling with the problem of youth violence in certain of its poor minority neighborhoods. Over the past 5 years, the city has experienced 155 youth homicides by gun and knife—most of which were gun victimizations of young black men. Although gun violence began when youths started selling crack cocaine in the 1980s, today youths in Boston's high-risk neighborhoods frequently carry and use guns out of fear and as part of a larger dynamic of gang activity.

Among recent efforts to contain gun violence in Boston, a National Institute of Justice-supported "problem-solving" project was launched to devise and implement strategic interventions and evaluate their effectiveness. Its unique approach has focused on first analyzing the supply and demand for guns and then trying unorthodox methods both to disrupt illicit firearms markets and deter serious youth violence. For more than a year, Harvard researchers have been meeting biweekly with a working group whose members include representatives of the Boston Police Department, the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), the U.S. Attorney's Office, the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office, the Massachusetts Department of Probation, and city-employed gang outreach and mediation specialists known as "street workers."

Boston's illicit gun market

Supply side. From the project's onset, the team recognized the need for disrupting the city's illicit gun market. They were already well aware of a freewheeling illicit firearms market, in spite of strict regulations governing

the sale of firearms in Massachusetts. It had been assumed that all guns ending up in the hands of juveniles were being brought in via the "I-95 pipeline" from Virginia, Georgia, Tennessee, and Mississippi. However, analysis determined that one-third of the traceable guns recovered from youths in the past 5 years had been purchased originally in Massachusetts—a discovery in keeping with what is known about the primary source of handguns even in other heavily regulated States, such as California. In Massachusetts, this local market had been almost entirely ignored by law enforcement.

Eighty percent of the guns taken from youths were handguns; of these, slightly more than 50 percent were semiautomatic pistols. Trace analysis revealed that more than 25 percent of the pistols recovered from youths were less than 2 years old, nearly half of these had been recovered within 6 months of initial retail sale, and the serial numbers on 20 percent had been obliterated. Moreover, of the thousands of new gun brands available on the market, five made up 40 percent of the total guns recovered. Together, the characteristics of the handguns taken from youthful offenders—purchased (for the most part) out-of-State, very new, semiautomatic, and obliterated serial numbers—pointed to the existence of a flow of new guns diverted into the illicit market at points very close to first retail sale; this was not the pattern of guns burgled from houses that is typical of adults.

Demand side. The researchers' practitioner partners argued from the beginning of the project that youth homicide in Boston was a problem of gang-involved, serial-offending youths victimizing one another. The project team began looking for clues in the backgrounds

of those involved in youth homicide. They found that the profiles of both victims and offenders were remarkably similar and included gang membership and high rates of offending.

Youth homicides are concentrated in neighborhoods that are home to an estimated 61 gangs or “crews,” involving approximately 1,300 juveniles; few alliances have been forged, and relationships are primarily hostile. Although gang turfs constitute less than 4 percent of the city, they account for 25 percent of Boston’s serious crime (e.g., drug dealing, assault and battery with guns and other weapons, and weapons offenses). The pattern of weapons use is markedly different, moreover, from that in surrounding communities. An analysis tracking youths treated in hospital emergency rooms showed that, compared to adjacent neighborhoods, this high-crime region had more incidents involving the use of every type of weapon. But, whereas knife wounds outnumbered gun wounds in the border areas, gun wounds were far more frequent in the heart of the youth homicide region.

Most youths living in hot spots were well known to the criminal justice system. For example, 75 percent of known homicide victims and offenders had at least been arraigned for some offense, 25 percent had been detained in a juvenile facility, and 55 percent had been on probation; in fact, 25 percent of offenders were on probation at the time they committed murder.

Strategic interventions

The project team reasoned that interventions would need to decrease both the supply of and demand for guns that were central to the “shooting wars” among criminally active gangs. The practitioner partners on the project team—i.e., the police, probation and parole officers, and street workers—have crafted a strategy aimed at curtailing serious youth violence across Boston’s high-risk neighborhoods. In one particularly violent gang neighborhood, they delivered a clear message to the effect that, unless the shootings stopped and guns were relinquished, gang members would be subject to an intense level of scrutiny and, for those on probation and parole, severe personal restrictions. Gang members were told that drug markets would shut down, warrants would be served, the streets would swarm with law enforcement officers (including a Federal presence), bedchecks would be performed on probationers, rooms would be searched by parole officers, unregistered cars would be taken away, and disorder offenses such as

drinking in public would be pursued. When one gang member with a 15-year history of violent felonies was found walking down the street with a single bullet in his possession, he was arrested. Taking into account his prior convictions, he was indicted as an armed career criminal and sentenced to nearly 20 years in prison. Stunned gang members soon turned over their handguns, and the neighborhood became quiet.

The project team is seeking the same results in other gang territories. What had been initially a reactive and tactical approach has now become preventive and strategic. Practitioners have let it be known to gangs throughout the city that shooting people, terrorizing their neighborhoods, and possessing or selling guns will not be tolerated. Gun suppliers have been put on notice that ATF is tracing recovered firearms, debriefing arrestees about gun trafficking, and following up on the results.

Gang members in Boston have been presented with a choice: Stop the flow of guns and stop the violence—or face rapid, focused, and comprehensive enforcement and corrections attention. It is too soon to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of this strategy, but its immediate impact has been more than encouraging. Gang members do not read about three-strikes laws or armed career criminal statutes in the *New York Times*; if they are to be reached, enforcement agencies must be forthcoming about the sanctions and consequences that result from criminal behavior and be ready to back those words with action. Youth violence in the city already appears to have been substantially reduced.

This summary is based on David Kennedy’s presentation to an audience of researchers and criminal justice practitioners as part of NIJ’s Research in Progress Seminar Series. David Kennedy is a senior researcher at the Kennedy School of Government’s Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management at Harvard University. A 60-minute VHS videotape of the seminar, *Juvenile Gun Violence and Gun Markets in Boston*, is available for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other countries). Please ask for NCJ 160766. Use the order form on the next page to obtain this videotape and any of the other tapes now available in the series.

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