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**Community Problem-Solving to Reduce Juvenile Gun Violence:  
Atlanta's Experience**

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## **I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In 1993, firearm-related deaths and injuries among American youth reached an all-time high. The following year, a consortium of federal officials, local government agencies and community groups came together to create metropolitan Atlanta Project PACT (Pulling America's Communities Together). The goal of this federally sponsored initiative was to reduce violent crime in a five-county area of metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia through coordinated community action. Following a series of consensus-building sessions, juvenile gun violence emerged as the top concern.

The Emory Center for Injury Control agreed to serve as the "evaluation partner" for metro Atlanta Project PACT's effort. Baseline measures of the magnitude, extent, and nature of juvenile gun violence in Atlanta were obtained, analyzed, and shared with participating agencies and community groups. In a lengthy series of training seminars and brain storming sessions, the best ideas of local law enforcement and juvenile justice were combined with lessons learned in other cities to produce a list of candidate interventions.

Initially, the effort focused on a set of proactive policing and prosecutorial interventions, which we termed "strategic firearms enforcement". Instead of relying on rapid response to 911 calls and post-incident investigations to catch violent gun offenders, strategic firearm enforcement seeks to preempt violent gun crimes by breaking the chain of illegal events that precede many shootings. These nonviolent crimes, which include illegal supply, acquisition and carrying of firearms, are necessary antecedents to more serious violent crimes, such as armed robbery, aggravated assault, and homicide. Strategic firearm enforcement, if effectively implemented and sustained, can reduce firearm violence and therefore compliment traditional community-building efforts such a teen outreach, offender rehabilitation and economic development.

Over the course of our project, both the intervention and the role of the evaluation team dramatically evolved. Initially, the evaluation team attempted to remain aloof from the process. It soon become necessary for the team to get directly involved in order to break down interagency barriers and keep the effort on track. Partnerships forged during the early days of the Atlanta PACT intervention matured through subsequent iterations of the program and continue to this day.

Community problem-solving is an evolutionary process that necessarily blurs the traditional boundaries between evaluators and evaluated. Insights from our project may be useful to communities that are considering engaging a research partner to help them identify, implement, evaluate and refine effective interventions to reduce firearm-related crime and violence.

## **II. BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

### **A. Magnitude of the Problem**

Firearm-related violence is one of the most pressing criminal justice problems in America. Between 1985 and 1991, the overall age-adjusted rate of firearm homicides in the United States increased 50 percent, from a rate of 5.1 per 100,000 to 7.6 per 100,000. The rate of homicide among adolescents and young adults grew even faster than among the general population. During this 6 year period, firearm homicides of 20-24 year olds increased 104 percent, from 9.9 to 20.1 per 100,000. Among 15 to 19 year olds, firearm homicides increased 187 percent, from 5.8 per 100,000 in 1985 to 16.6 in 1991 (source: National Center for Health Statistics). In 1994, the rate of firearm homicide among 15-19 year olds was three times higher than it had been 10 years earlier (Snyder, 1996). After peaking in 1993, firearm homicides and assaults have decreased significantly in all age groups. Nevertheless, they remain significantly higher than historical levels (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999; Zawitz and Strom, 2000).

Firearm violence strikes particularly hard within the African-American community. Rates of firearm homicide among African-Americans have long been higher than among whites of comparable age, but the gap widened further between 1985 and 1991. (Zahn 1989, Fingerhut 1994) In 1985, the rate of firearm homicides among African-Americans exceeded that of whites by a ratio of 7.5 to one. By 1991, the ratio had increased to more than 10 to one (source: National Center for Health Statistics). In 1996, the rate of gun homicides among African American men 18-29 years of age was 133.5 per 100,000 - 25 times the rate for white men of the same age (Cook and Ludwig, 2000). Between 1993 and 1997, African Americans accounted for more than half of all victims of firearm homicide and nonfatal firearm injury in the United States (Zawitz and Strom, 2000).

### **B. Impact of Violence on juveniles and youth**

The impact of firearm violence is not limited to homicides. Nonfatal firearm assaults outnumber homicides by a ratio of four to one (Cook 1991, Kellermann et al 1996). Many nonfatal shootings inflict serious injuries that result in long term disability (Kellermann et al, 1996). In the 1990s violence overtook falls as the second-leading cause of spinal cord injury in the United States. (DeVivo, 1997) Most spinal cord injuries related to violence are the result of a gunshot wound.

Teens face a substantially higher risk of victimization from gun violence than adults. Between 1987 and 1992 the rate of handgun crimes committed against youths 16-19 years of age was nearly three times higher than the national average. Between 1993 and 1997, 35% of the victims of nonfatal gunshot wounds from crime, and 24% of all homicide victims were less than 21 years of age. (Zawitz and Strom, 2000)

Young African-American males face a particularly high risk of becoming a victim of firearm violence. A study of fatal and nonfatal firearm injuries in 3 U.S. cities revealed that African-American males 15-24 years of age are shot at 25 times the rate of white males of the same

age range (Kellermann et al, 1996). A majority of teenaged victims of gun violence live in economically depressed, inner-city neighborhoods (Rand, 1994). A 1992 study conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics determined that 15-19 year olds living in core metropolitan counties are much more likely to be a victim of firearm homicide than their peers in fringe, medium, or small metropolitan counties (Fingerhut 1993). According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, in 1997, 1 in 4 murders occurred in just five of the nation's more than 3,000 counties. (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999)

In addition to inflicting physical harm, firearm injuries can produce long-lasting psychological harm as well. An anonymous survey of 1,653 male and female inner-city high school students, conducted at the height of the youth gun violence epidemic, revealed that 20 percent of respondents had been threatened with a gun. Twelve percent reported they had been shot at (Sheley 1992). Another survey of inner-city youth revealed that 42 percent of the interviewees had personally seen someone knifed or shot; 22 percent stated that they had seen someone killed (Schubiner 1993). Sheley and Wright interviewed 758 male students in ten inner-city high schools with high rates of violence and found that nearly half had been threatened with a gun or shot at on their way to or from school. One in three reported being beaten in or on the way to school; one in ten stated that they been stabbed (Sheley and Wright 1993). In light of findings like these, it is not surprising that many inner-city youth have adopted fatalistic attitudes towards violence. (Harris 1993).

Longitudinal studies of youth in Denver and Pittsburgh indicate that juveniles and young adults face a higher risk of serious injury due to assault or robbery than adults in the general population. Nevertheless, certain subsets of young people face a substantially higher risk of becoming a victims than others. For example, young males and females who have been in gang fights, have delinquent peers, sell drugs, commit violent acts against others, and/or carry a weapon are far more likely to be seriously injured as a result of violence than peers who do not. (Loeber 2001)

### **C. Youth Violence, Guns, and the Illicit Drug Market**

In hindsight, the rise in juvenile gun violence that occurred between 1985 and 1993 appears to have been triggered by recruitment of juveniles into the drug trade, and subsequent diffusion of guns to an expanding circle of youth (Blumstein, 1995, 1996). Between 1987 and 1994, the arrest rate of juveniles for weapons violations nearly doubled (Snyder, 1996). At approximately the same time, the rate of homicides committed by juveniles aged 18 and younger doubled as well (Blumstein, 1996). Gangs facilitated the diffusion of guns by arming ever-younger individuals. (Lizotte and Shepard, 2001) When armed drug sellers and gang members began using their guns to intimidate or harm peers, other juveniles sought guns to protect themselves (Blumstein 1995, Cook 1996). Some young people saw carrying a gun as a way to acquire status or power (Blumstein 1996, Decker, Pannell and Caldwell 1997).

### **D. Illegal carrying of guns by juveniles and youth**

Those juveniles who wished to acquire a gun found ready sources of supply. Sixty percent

of respondents to a 1993 national survey of school children in grades 6 through 12 reported that they "could get a handgun if they wanted one" (Harris, 1993). Legal prohibitions against selling firearms to minors did little to slow down the flow of guns to juveniles, primarily because they were so difficult to enforce (Cook and Malliconi, 1994, Decker, Pannell and 1997).

In 1993, the number of Americans killed or injured by firearms in peacetime reached an all-time high (Cook and Ludwig, 2000). That same year, the Division of Adolescent and School Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) added questions about weapons carrying to its Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), which is administered biannually to a nationally representative sample of US students in grades 9-12. In 1993, 7.9% of the male and female high school students who participated in the survey reported carrying a gun in the preceding 30 days. (CDC, 1995) When the question was repeated in the 1995 edition of the survey, the proportion of juveniles carrying a gun dipped slightly, from 7.9% to 7.6%. Not surprisingly, certain subsets of students reported carrying a gun more commonly than others. In 1995, 12.3% of boys reported carrying a gun in the preceding 30 days, compared to only 2.5% of girls. Nearly 19% of African American male students reported carrying a gun in the preceding 30 days, compared to 10% of white male students. (CDC, 1996)

Several teams of researchers have generated useful statistics about gun carrying by youth. Sheley and Wright surveyed a selected sample of 835 serious juvenile offenders incarcerated in 6 juvenile detention facilities and 758 male students in 10 high schools near these facilities (Sheley and Wright 1993). Eighty-three percent of the detainees and 22 percent of the students reported that they had possessed (or currently possess) one or more guns. More than half of the detainees said they had carried a gun "all or most of the time" in the year or two before incarceration. Twelve percent of the students who were interviewed reported that they carried a gun regularly; another 23 percent said they carried a gun "now and then".

Another NIJ sponsored study examined accessibility and use of firearms by adult and juvenile arrestees in 11 major urban areas around the country. (Decker, Pennell and Caldwell, 1997) Fourteen percent of interviewees reported that they carried a gun "all or most of the time". Among juveniles, the proportion that reported carrying a gun "all or most of the time" was 20 percent. The rate of gun carrying by admitted gang members was 31 percent. Drug selling was associated with higher rates of gun carrying, but drug *use* was not - arrestees who tested positive for drugs of abuse were no more likely to report gun carrying than arrestees who tested negative.

#### **E. Sources of guns for juveniles and youth**

Where, when and from whom young people acquire their first firearm appears to predict their subsequent pattern of carrying. Boys who are socialized into legal gun ownership by their parents are more likely to own a firearm for sport, while boys who are socialized into illegal gun ownership by delinquent peers or gang members are six times more likely to own a gun for protection (Lizotte and Shepard, 2001). Most youth who carry a gun do so intermittently; many spontaneously desist after a period of time. (Lizotte and Shepard, 2001). However, delinquent youth who purposefully acquire their first firearm are more likely to become frequent or constant gun carriers than those who are given their first gun, or acquire one by chance (Ash et al, 1996).

More than half of respondents in another NIJ study of arrestees reported that guns are easy to obtain illegally, most often with cash. (Decker, Pennell and Caldwell, 1997) Drug selling and gang membership were strongly associated with acquisition of guns through illegal means. Theft was commonly reported as well. One quarter of juvenile male arrestees, 30 percent of juvenile drug sellers and 29 percent of gang members reported stealing a gun.

Although cheap, small caliber handguns commonly appear in large numbers of crime gun trace requests, juvenile offenders report that they prefer new, high quality semi-automatic pistols to older, cheap handguns (Sheley 1993, Cook 1994, Zawitz 1995, Ash 1996). Kennedy and colleagues in Boston (1996,1997) studied the characteristics of handguns seized from young offenders, and noted that most were relatively new, semiautomatic pistols, most were purchased out of state, and a sizable minority had obliterated serial numbers. In the words of the authors, these observations "...pointed to the existence of a flow of new guns diverted into the illicit market at points very close to retail sale." Street-wise youth are aware of the functional limitations and possible criminal history attached to older weapons, and are willing to pay a premium for a new one. One Atlanta youth offered the following observation, "If there are no bodies on it, or if it is out of the box, then it is going to cost you more" (Ash 1996).

In 1997, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms released data on gun tracing requests from 17 communities. The Bureau found that juvenile crime guns represented a significant percentage of all crime gun requests, but adult crime guns predominated. Juveniles (under the age of 18) and youth aged (18-24) accounted for 45 percent of all traces. A disproportionate number of juvenile and youth crime guns were handguns, particularly semiautomatics. Based on the relatively short time interval between first retail sale of these weapons and their subsequent recovery by law enforcement, ATF analysts concluded that many of these weapons were rapidly diverted from first retail sale at federally licensed gun dealer to a black market that supplies guns to juveniles and youth. (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, 1997 and 1997)

## **F. Illegal use of guns by juveniles and youth**

The majority of juveniles interviewed about gun ownership report that they carry a gun for protection (Sheley and Wright 1993, Cook 1994; Ash 1996, Decker SH and Van Winkle B. 1996; Decker, Pennell, and Caldwell 1997). Peer views are also important in shaping juvenile perceptions about gun carrying. Twenty-eight percent of a sample of juvenile arrestees agreed with the statement, "your crowd respects you if you have a gun". The corresponding proportions among young people who are gang members or drug sellers was 40% (Decker, Pennell, and Caldwell 1997). Relatively few juveniles acknowledge carrying a gun to facilitate illegal activities, such as robbery or drug trafficking (Decker, Pennell, and Caldwell 1997; Lizotte and Shepard, 2001) However, many juvenile arrestees, particularly gang members and/or drug sellers, report that they have used a gun to commit a crime at one time or another. (Decker, Pennell and Caldwell, 1997)

Gun carrying adds a deadly dimension to the youthful bravado and interpersonal conflicts that are common during adolescence. In his landmark essay, "The Code of the Streets", Elijah

Anderson (1994) describes how many young African-American men living in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods of south Philadelphia compensate for their lack of power in society at large by demanding “respect” from everyone they meet on the street. The “Code of the Streets” requires personal retaliation for any perceived slight or harm. The odds that assault will result in serious injury or death are markedly increased when a gun is involved. (Zimring 1968, Reiss and Roth 1993, Roth 1994, Kellermann 1994)

NIJ researchers asked arrestees in 11 US cities what circumstances justify using a firearm as opposed to merely carrying it. Nine percent agreed with the statement “It is OK to shoot someone who disrespected you”. Twenty eight percent of adult and juvenile arrestees, and even higher percentages of arrestees that identified themselves as drug sellers and/or gang members, agreed with the statement “It is OK to shoot someone who hurt you” (Decker, Pennell, and Caldwell 1997).

Although protection is frequently cited as a motivation for carrying a firearm; carrying affords little protection if your assailant shoots first. The saying on the street is “Up beats a draw every time”. Since shooting first affords a tactical advantage, every confrontation requires hair-trigger vigilance. With the stakes so high, an unexpected move, misinterpreted gesture, or momentary lapse in attention can precipitate a shooting (Roth, 1994).

In light of this fact, it is not surprising that the rapid growth in illegal gun carrying by juveniles and youth was associated with a striking increase in firearm-related assaults and homicides. (Blumstein 1996, Cook 1996, Lizotte and Shepard, 2001) By the early to mid 1990’s, gun use by juveniles had become a major problem for law enforcement agencies across the United States. (Shepard, 2000, Snyder, 2001)

#### **E. Applying the “problem-solving” approach to community crime and violence**

In its landmark 1993 report, *Understanding and Preventing Violence*, the National Research Council’s Panel on the Understanding and Control of Violent Behavior described how the “problem-solving approach” can be used to develop and refine effective approaches to community violence:

*“Successful interventions, sound evaluations, and basic science are mutually supportive but difficult to coordinate and carry out. There is little disagreement with the axiom, ‘The best way to find out if X affects Y is to manipulate X and measure the change in Y.’ Unless that is done effectively, neither researchers nor policy makers are entitled to make any definitive statements about what works and what does not....turning suggestions into workable and effective solutions to violence requires a problem-solving approach (emphasis added) that includes designing publicly acceptable interventions, evaluating them, using the results to refine the intervention, and replicating the evaluation. That process can contribute to improved violence control capability while it contributes to scientific understanding of violence. But it takes commitment by policy makers and the research community to the principles outlined below...”*

The problem-solving approach encourages those responsible for a program to analyze the situation, devise an intervention, measure its impact and modify the intervention based on experience and feedback. Data are shared to determine what works, what does not, and how the program may be modified to achieve its goals. Interaction fosters ownership and commitment to the process (Cohen 1991).

While appealing in theory, the "problem-solving approach" can be difficult to implement in practice (Reiss 1993). Local governments are reluctant to allocate scarce resources to program evaluation, whether before or after an intervention. As a result, programs are frequently implemented without a plan to assess their effectiveness (Kellermann 1993).

## **F. Youth, Firearms and Violence in Metropolitan Atlanta**

This is the context in which a consortium of local, state and federal officials in metropolitan Atlanta came together to use the "problem-solving approach" to identify and refine a promising set of strategies to combat juvenile gun violence. In the ten years prior to implementing this project, Atlanta had experienced a huge surge in juvenile gun violence. In Fulton County, GA (which includes most of the City of Atlanta) murders of young black men increased five-fold between 1984 and 1993 (source: Fulton County Medical Examiner).

In 1994, five-counties in metro Atlanta (the City of Atlanta, the core counties of Fulton, and DeKalb, and Cobb, Clayton and Gwinnett counties) was designated a demonstration community for a federal initiative called "Project PACT" (an acronym for "Pulling America's Communities Together"). Conceived by the US Department of Justice and supported by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and the Office of Drug Policy, PACT was designed to bring communities and federal agencies together to address crime and violence problems at the local level.

The first organizational meeting of Metro Atlanta Project PACT brought a wide range of local government officials, business leaders, heads of local nonprofits, the faith community, and federal agencies together to discuss the situation. Homicide, gun violence, and juvenile crime were identified as major community concerns. At a subsequent meeting of Atlanta PACT leadership, the decision was made to approach illegal guns in the same way many communities attempt to deal with illegal drugs - through *demand reduction* (i.e., preventive education and deterrence); *supply reduction* (by targeting illegal gun trafficking); and *rehabilitation* of youthful gun offenders. PACT participants hoped that combining strategies would be more effective than relying on one alone. (Roth 1994, Kennedy 1994, Cook 1996, Bilchik 1996)

The Emory Center for Injury Control was asked to monitor and evaluate the effort. Funding was secured from a consortium of 3 research agencies: the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (NIJ grant #94-MU-CX-K003).

## G. Project Goals & Objectives

- Use the “problem-solving approach” to plan, implement, evaluate, and refine a program to reduce juvenile firearm violence in metropolitan Atlanta, GA.
- Identify a complimentary mix of strategies to prevent illegal carrying and use of firearms by juveniles.
- Demonstrate the value of a *strategic* approach to violence prevention that combines the methodological expertise of researchers with the knowledge and experience of practitioners.

To guide the evaluation team’s efforts, six objectives were identified:

1. Measure fear of crime among adults in the project area.
2. Map and track temporal and geographical patterns of juvenile gun violence.
3. Determine where and why juveniles acquire guns.
4. Develop a comprehensive intervention to reduce juvenile gun violence
5. Implement the intervention in a defined area of Atlanta.
6. Evaluate the intervention and refine the approach.

A summary of our experience follows:

### **Objective #1: Measure fear of crime among adults in the project area.**

To gauge community concern about the problem of juvenile violence and track its evolution over time, we conducted 3 stratified, random-digit telephone surveys of voting age adults in the five PACT counties. We felt that this information might be useful to guide and/or reinforce the actions of local officials, involved in the intervention. The first survey was conducted in the spring of 1995, a second round was completed in the fall of 1996, and a third survey was completed in 1999.

Each survey contacted a stratified sample of 500 adults, 21 years of age or older – 100 in each of the 5 PACT counties. Respondents were queried about their perceptions, beliefs and attitudes regarding juvenile crime and violence. They were also asked questions about their personal ownership, acquisition, disposition and storage of firearms over the preceding year. (Kellermann et al, 2000)

All 3 editions of the survey found that concern about juvenile crime varied widely from county to county. Citizens in Fulton County (which has the highest rates of juvenile crime in the metro Atlanta area) expressed the most concern. Citizens in Cobb and Gwinnett County, where rates of juvenile crime are generally low, expressed the least concern. Citizens of DeKalb and Clayton Counties, which generally have rates between those of the other 3 counties, expressed intermediate levels of concern. Interestingly, citizens in every county, including Fulton, expressed greater concern about juvenile crime *in the metro area overall* than in their own county. When asked to identify who is doing the most to reduce juvenile violence, white respondents were most

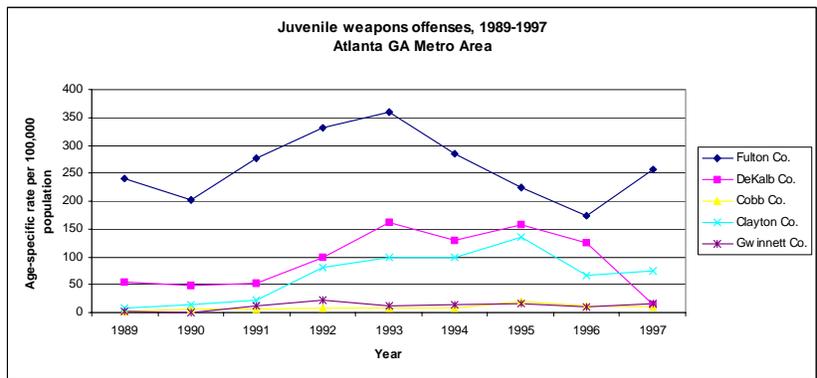
likely to credit local law enforcement. African-American respondents, on the other hand, rated local churches most favorably.

Approximately 36% of the adults who responded to the first survey reported that one or more guns were kept in their home. Three out of every four said that at least one of their guns was a handgun. Only one percent of respondents stated that they or a member of their household had participated in a gun buy-back program in the previous year. However, 10 percent stated that they or a member of their household had acquired a gun during the same span of time.

**Objective #2: Map and track temporal and geographical patterns of juvenile gun violence.**

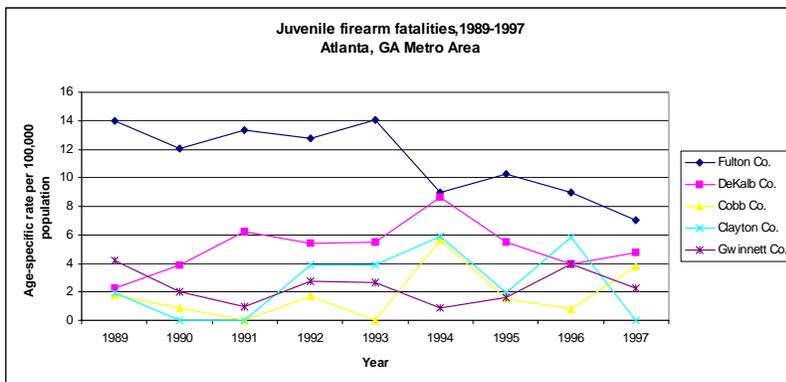
To characterize the rate of firearm-related crime and violence involving juveniles, we obtained data from several sources, including the Georgia Crime Information Center, the case files of the County Medical Examiners in the PACT area, and “Cops and Docs” - a community-based firearm injury notification system (described in greater detail below). Information from these sources was merged and analyzed document annual rates of juvenile assault with a firearm, other juvenile crimes involving a gun, county-specific rates of nonfatal firearm injury, and firearm-related death by age group.

The overall rate of juvenile weapons offenses in metro Atlanta peaked in 1993 and has declined thereafter. Fulton County weapons offenses declined 37% by 1995, but subsequently rebounded. Modest increases were noted in Clayton and DeKalb Counties in 1995, but subsequently declined. Arrests for gun carrying by teens in Cobb and Gwinnett Counties remained low throughout the project period.



Juvenile aggravated assaults in Fulton County peaked in 1993, and then declined 25% before rebounding in 1997. Minor fluctuations were noted in DeKalb, Cobb, Clayton and Gwinnett Counties throughout this period.

County-specific rates of firearm-related homicide were monitored through use of County Medical Examiner data. Overall, rates of firearm homicide of juveniles peaked in 1993, and then began to fall. Each year, more than half of all juvenile firearm homicides in the 5 county PACT area occurred in Fulton County. Nearly 80 percent of the firearm homicide victims in the 5 county

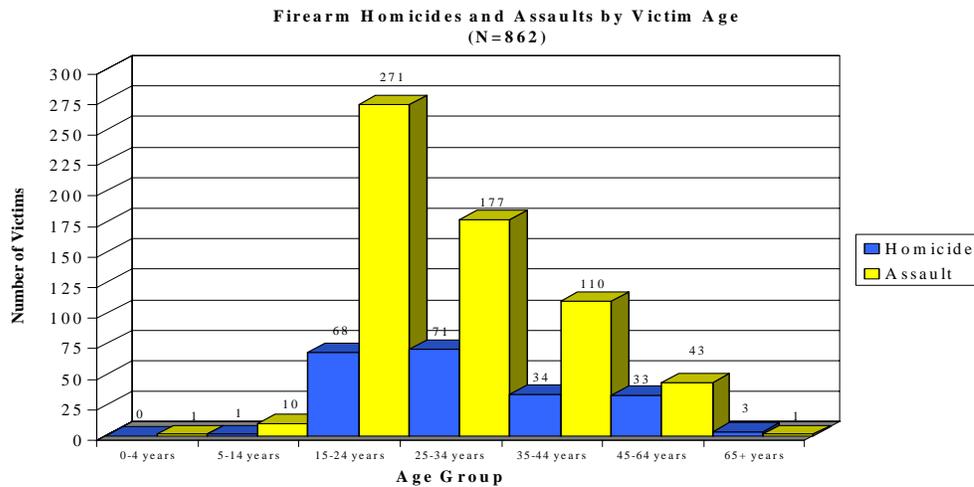


area were African-American; 84 percent were male.

Data on nonfatal firearm injuries were collected through a regional firearm-injury notification system established with the support of another NIJ grant (see report on Regional Monitoring of Gun Violence: The Georgia Unified Notification System NIJ #95-IJ-CX-0025, and Kellermann and Bartolomeos, 1998). Metro Atlanta hospital emergency departments submit reports to a single collecting point at the Georgia Bureau of Investigation where they were forwarded to the Center for Injury Control for analysis. Using a set of common identifiers, each medical report was linked with its corresponding police offense report. Medical examiner reports were used to identify all fatalities. When the location of the incident was documented, it was mapped using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software to portray gun violence “hot-spots” and assess the impact of law enforcement countermeasures (Kellermann and Bartolomeos 1998; Kellermann et al 2000).

Initially, mapping was done at the Center for Injury Control at the Rollins School of Public Health. Later, this responsibility was assumed by the Greater Atlanta Data Center (GADC), a Department of Justice-funded center that collects, links, analyzes and maps crime, violence, geographic and social data to support of law enforcement.

Descriptive analysis of shooting reports demonstrated that a striking number of firearm assault and homicide victims were adolescents or young adults aged 15-24. Case reviews revealed that most of these shooters were individuals of the same gender, age range, and ethnicity as the victims (unpublished data, Atlanta Police Department Crime Analysis Unit).



GIS analysis demonstrated that a substantial number of shootings were concentrated in relatively stable geographic clusters in south and west Atlanta (Map 1).

These areas are characterized by high rates of poverty, extreme household crowding, large numbers of single-parent households, high rates of unemployment and low levels of educational attainment. In fact, nearly half of the city's homicides occur in just nine of the 53 beats patrolled by the Atlanta Police Department. All 9 of these beats are located in areas of low socio-economic status. (Map 2)

### **Objective #3: Determine where and why juveniles acquire guns**

To determine how, when, where and why Atlanta juveniles acquire and carry guns, we conducted focus groups with Atlanta area youth. We also conducted a number of individual interviews with incarcerated juvenile offenders. Information gleaned from these interviews was subsequently compared with the observations of local law enforcement officers and juvenile justice officials chosen on the strength of their experience working with juveniles. A synthesis of these interviews was used to develop candidate intervention strategies.

To discern the views of community youth, four focus groups were conducted with metro Atlanta teenagers in 1995. A second round of focus groups was convened in 1999. Individuals were recruited by random-digit dialing, and did not know each other before participating in the session. Parental consent was obtained at the time of participation, and confidentiality was assured.

One focus group in each series consisted of 15-16 year old urban African-American males. A second consisted of 15-16 year old suburban white males. The third consisted of 15-16 year old urban African-American females and the fourth consisted of 11-13 year old urban African-American males. Each group had 8-12 participants. During the 2.5-hour sessions, participants were queried about violence in their neighborhood, use of weapons in self-defense, attitudes about school safety, and their views about the pros and cons of carrying a gun. They were also asked to

suggest ways youth violence might be prevented.

A majority of focus group participants drew a direct connection between drugs, gangs, and violence. Many participants, particularly the African-American participants, consider violence part of their everyday life. Almost all of the interviewees, white and black alike, claimed that they could easily obtain a gun if they wanted one. They also expressed the belief that gun carrying by juveniles is quite common. When asked where youth are most likely to carry a gun, most answered “to a club”. When asked where youth are least likely to carry a gun, the answer was most often “in school”. Most of our focus group participants seemed resigned to the inevitability of violence. Few expressed hope that things will ever get better. They were generally unenthusiastic about every violence prevention measure proposed to them.

To learn more about the attitudes of high-risk youth, three additional focus groups were conducted with youth at local youth service centers. In contrast to white teens from the Atlanta suburbs, white teens at youth centers reported witnessing violence as frequently as their inner city African-American peers.

The second round of focus groups in 1999 used the same sampling strategy and group structure as before. Participants in this second round viewed the problem of youth violence more positively than in 1995, but common themes remained. African-American youth continued to report exposure to violence and weapons more frequently than their suburban white peers. However, virtually all of the focus group participants, black and white, continued to claim that firearms are readily available to juveniles. Other than school-based “zero tolerance” policies, none of the participants were aware of any organized effort to discourage gun carrying by juveniles.

To get more in-depth information about the attitudes and behavior of juvenile offenders, Peter Ash, MD, Chief of Forensic Child Psychiatry at Emory, lead a team that conducted confidential interviews with individual boys and girls incarcerated by the Georgia Department of Children and Youth Services (DCYS) or the Fulton County Juvenile Court. (Ash et al, 1996). Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. Interview participants were incarcerated for a variety of crimes, ranging from status offenses to murder. Forty-two of the respondents were male, and 21 were female. Sixty-six percent were African-American. The mean age was 15.7 (range: 13 to 18 years).

When asked what advice they would give to a friend who needed a gun in a hurry, most respondents recommended, “buy on the street” (57%), followed by “steal” (19%), “borrow” (9%), “trade for one” (6%) or “buy a gun from a pawn shop or an adult” (straw purchaser) (4%). Almost all of them identified multiple alternatives if the first source didn't work out. According to our respondents, guns are readily available for cash or by trading “guns, drugs, bodies, jewelry, [or] stereo equipment”, or by borrowing. Renting was rarely mentioned. To locate someone willing to sell a gun, the respondents suggested, “Go to where most of the drug dealing is going on”. Eighty three percent of the interviewees stated that the source they would approach also sells drugs (Ash, 1996).

When asked how they feel when they carry a gun, 40% of Ash's interviewees said “safer”.

Another 40% said that they felt more “energized” or “powerful”. However, one-third reported feeling more anxious because they feared being stopped by the police (Ash, 1996).

Not all of our efforts to discern youth attitudes and behavior were this successful. We had hoped to track self-reported rates of juvenile gun carrying in each of the 5 PACT counties by convincing local school systems to administer the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s “Youth Risk Behavior Survey” (YRBS). This structured questionnaire elicits confidential information from students about a variety of high-risk behaviors that can affect health, such as drug use, physical fighting, and the carrying of guns or other weapons. Unfortunately, we were unable to convince enough systems to participate to generate a valid sample for analysis. Ironically, the administrators who declined were not reluctant to ask their students questions about guns and violence. Rather, they feared a parental backlash to questions about sex.

After obtaining qualitative information about firearms and violence from Atlanta youth, we compared our findings with the opinions of Atlanta area law enforcement officers who have special expertise in juvenile crime and violence. To identify whom to interview, we asked the heads of major law enforcement and juvenile justice agencies in the 5 PACT counties to recommend members of their force who are particularly knowledgeable about juvenile crime and violence.

Most of the police officers and juvenile justice officials interviewed in 1995 stated that they felt less safe on duty than they had five years previously. Most cited as the basis for their concern the unpredictability of adolescents and easy access to firearms. Strong support was expressed for measures aimed at reducing gun trafficking to youth, as well as proactive efforts to deter young people from carrying firearms. A second round of interviews in 1999 produced virtually identical findings.

#### **Objective #4: Develop a comprehensive intervention to reduce juvenile gun violence.**

As information was collected and analyzed, it was shared with participating law enforcement agencies, juvenile justice programs, and community groups. Public forums were held to present the evaluation team’s findings and solicit ideas. Working sessions with grassroots community groups were first organized in May, July, September and October of 1995 and periodically continued over the next 2 years. To insure that the team’s findings reached the Metro Atlanta PACT leadership, we made regular presentations to this group as well.

A three-pronged approach was envisioned to guide Atlanta’s PACT’s efforts to reduce juvenile gun violence: 1) *reduce illegal demand* for firearms through a combination of youth outreach and community-based violence prevention programs; 2) *rehabilitate juvenile gun offenders* through court-based diversion programs and other innovative strategies, and 3) *reduce illegal supply* of firearms through proactive law enforcement. By closely integrating the work of community-based organizations with that of local law enforcement and juvenile justice agencies, Atlanta PACT hoped to amplify the impact of these strategies.

## Reduce illegal demand

Initially, community groups were very interested in participating in a "comprehensive approach" to juvenile gun violence. To facilitate involvement, the evaluation team prepared an inventory of local non-profit and faith-based organizations that provide after-hours recreation, mentoring, and/or peer-mediation programs for youth. It was hoped that enhancing coordination between these organizations could help them reach more youth.

It soon became clear that the goal of closer coordination was unachievable with the modest resources at hand. No organization was willing to take a back seat or modify its agenda for another. Rather than risk antagonizing groups by appearing to favor one over another, PACT abandoned the idea of a tightly coordinated "demand reduction" strategy. Instead, the PACT steering committee urged local foundations and community agencies to support the community based prevention programs of their choice.

Another idea that failed to take hold was a plan to encourage homeowners to lock up their guns. It was thought that this could reduce the loss of guns through burglary or theft, and thereby decrease diversion to the illegal market. Ketchum Communications, a well-known public relations firm with an office in Atlanta, donated staff time and talent to create a public education campaign around the slogan "Lock and Unload". Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain enough financial backing from the Atlanta business community to implement the campaign.

To raise local awareness of the initiative, several efforts were made to engage the local news media. We hoped that stories about the intervention would send a deterrent message about illegal gun carrying to the community, reduce fear of crime and create a sense of positive momentum. A briefing for local print, radio and television outlets was held at Emory's Rollins School of Public Health. Although the event was reasonably well attended, it generated few stories. Some of those that resulted were counterproductive. For example, one local TV station produced a two-part series on juvenile gun violence. To dramatize the seriousness of the problem, it used video clips of local shootings and short interviews with Atlanta youth. To describe what could be done about the problem, the station flew a reporter and camera crew to Boston to cover the work being done there (Kennedy, 1997). No mention was made of Metro Atlanta PACT's efforts to address the problem.

It was originally thought that community groups offered the best vehicle to implement "demand reduction" strategies. When our own research revealed that the primary reason juvenile offenders wanted a gun was for protection and that few feared arrest for carrying a gun, we reconsidered this assumption. These findings suggested that efforts to reduce juvenile demand for guns might be more profitably directed towards reducing fear of victimization and/or increasing fear of arrest. Accomplishing either objective might tip the scales against deciding to carry a gun.

## Rehabilitate juvenile gun offenders

At the outset of the project, leaders of Metro Atlanta PACT hoped to enhance rehabilitation of youthful gun offenders through expanded use of diversion programs and intensive supervision of

youth on probation. (Wilson 1994; Wasserman 2000). (Then) Chief Judge Glenda Hatchett of the Fulton County Juvenile Court strongly supported the effort, and directed her staff to participate in task force meetings. She also instructed Juvenile Court staff to cooperate with law enforcement efforts to debrief juvenile gun offenders.

Unfortunately, the Chief Judge's efforts were hampered by a huge caseload, a chronic shortage of probation officers, and budget cuts to core programs. Then, Fulton County Juvenile Court was advised on short notice that ownership of their courtrooms and detention facility was being transferred from the county to state government. This forced the court to relocate on short notice.

Meanwhile, the Georgia Department of Children's and Youth Services (DCYS) was contending with its own challenges. Allegations of mistreatment of inmates in DCYS facilities led to a court-ordered mandate for remediation and intense oversight of the agency. In light of the difficulties faced by both agencies, we decided to indefinitely defer the idea of implementing new strategies to rehabilitate juvenile gun offenders.

### Reduce illegal supply

In contrast to the setbacks experienced with community nonprofits and the juvenile justice system, considerable progress was made in encouraging area law enforcement agencies to adopt a proactive approach to juvenile gun violence. As a result, the Atlanta Police Department joined forces with the Atlanta Field Office of the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), the Fulton County District Attorney, and the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Georgia to form a strategic alliance to combat juvenile and adult gun violence in the city of Atlanta. Other groups involved in advancing or facilitating the effort included then Governor Roy Barnes; the Georgia Board of Pardons & Paroles; Georgia Department of Corrections; Housing Authority of the City of Atlanta; MARTA Police Services; Georgia Bureau of Investigation; the Atlanta Mayor's Office of Community Affairs; Greater Atlanta Data Center, Burriss Institute, Kennesaw State University; United States Probation; Georgia Chiefs and Sheriffs; Georgia District Attorneys Association; Atlanta City Solicitor; Atlanta HIDTA; Drug Enforcement Administration; Georgia Public Safety Commissioner; Fulton County Sheriffs' Department; United States Marshal; Atlanta Downtown Improvement District & Atlanta Ambassadors; Georgia National Guard; and the Atlanta Department of Corrections. Progress did not occur overnight, but gradually evolved through meetings, briefings and strategy sessions.

Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping metro area shootings revealed that the bulk of firearm assaults and homicides were concentrated in the poorest quarters of the city – neighborhoods with historically high levels of crime and violence. Therefore, the decision was made to concentrate street-level enforcement in these neighborhoods. When preliminary data from ATF's project LEAD and its Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative confirmed that nearly three quarters of the juvenile and youth crime guns confiscated in Atlanta originated in Georgia, efforts to reduce the illegal supply of firearms to Atlanta youth were pursued throughout the 5 county PACT area and beyond. (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, 1997, 1997)

During the initial phases of consensus development, a working group of law enforcement officials from the Atlanta Police Department and allied organizations was briefed on the baseline findings of the evaluation team. To give APD and other law enforcement agencies an idea of what can be accomplished with the problem-solving approach, the evaluation team brought 3 national experts on gun violence reduction to Atlanta. Lawrence Sherman, PhD, the architect of the “The Kansas City Gun Experiment” (Sherman, Shaw and Rogan, 1995) presented his findings on proactive policing to deter illegal gun carrying in high-crime areas. David Kennedy, PhD and Anthony Braga, Ph.D., the Harvard researchers who helped Boston devise and implement a comprehensive gang-based strategy to reduce juvenile homicides, also presented their work (Kennedy, Piehl, and Braga, 1996; Kennedy, 1997). Working with these concepts, locally derived data, the input of the Emory evaluation team, and their own ideas, the PACT working group constructed a candidate list of interventions.

The officials charged with responsibility for the intervention were urged to envision gun violence as the predictable result of a chain of events, each involving an illegal act. The links in this chain include 1) illegal *demand* for firearms by juveniles and/or legally proscribed adults, such as individuals with felony records; 2) illegal *supply* of firearms through gun traffickers, straw purchasers, and theft; 3) illegal *carrying* of firearms, so the weapon is available when needed, and finally, 4) illegal *use* in violent crimes (figure 1). It should, therefore, be possible to strategically apply law enforcement resources to break the chain at various points, and thereby prevent many shootings. Instead of waiting to react to the next 911 call, law enforcement would take proactive steps to prevent it.

To further this objective, Atlanta PACT and its successor programs in Atlanta combined a number of local, state and federal enforcement and prosecutorial initiatives into a synergistic effort to reduce gun violence at the community level (figure 2). Brief descriptions of these initiatives follow:

- **Reduce Fear of Victimization & Increase Fear of Arrest** - In an effort to deter the illegal carrying of firearms in specific neighborhoods known to be “hot spots” of gun violence, the Atlanta Police Department established a special “Guns and Violent Crime Suppression Unit” and instructed it to implement a program of traffic stops and proactive patrols (described in greater detail, below). Because the effort was intended to deter the illegal carrying and use of firearms by juveniles and adult felons, the program was dubbed *Operation ICU* by then Atlanta Police Chief Beverly Harward. “ICU” could also stand for “I See You” emphasizing the objective of deterrence, and “Intensive Care Unit” underscoring the program’s goal of preventing aggravated assaults as well as homicides.
- **Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative/LEAD** - The street-level enforcement efforts of APD were complimented by *Project LEAD* and the *Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative*, two federal programs developed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and aimed at disrupting illegal trafficking of firearms to adult felons and juveniles, respectively (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, 1997). Both programs analyze data from large numbers of crime gun traces to pinpoint suspected scofflaw dealers and straw

purchasers (Cook and Braga, 2001). To insure that the programs were closely coordinated with *Operation ICU*, a working group of ATF agents and APD officers met regularly to share data, exchange ideas, and plan joint operations.

- **NIBIN** – the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network, developed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, enables regional crime labs to link disparate shooting incidents to each other by matching projectiles recovered from various crime scenes and/or victims. NIBIN technology creates digital images of bullets and shell casings, and compares them to an electronic “library” of thousands of images of projectiles and casings collected from previous victims, crime scenes, and test-fired weapons. The technology permits technicians to quickly search tens of thousands of images for possible matches, or “hits. (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, 2002) Manual examination by a crime lab technician is required to confirm a presumptive match. To increase the number of specimens submitted to the system, the evaluation team arranged for trauma surgeons at two local facilities - Grady Memorial Hospital (Atlanta’s public hospital and only level 1 trauma center) and DeKalb Medical Center (a major community hospital and level III trauma center) - to submit bullets recovered from aggravated assault victims in the course of emergency surgery.
- **“Cops and Docs”** (Emory Center for Injury Control, Greater Atlanta Data Center). Described above, “Cops and Docs” collects shooting reports from area Emergency Departments, Medical Examiner offices, police departments and the Atlanta 911 Center. The linked data were used to map incidents of firearm violence throughout the City of Atlanta. *Cops and Docs* data were very useful to pinpoint neighborhood “hot spots” of gun violence activity and track changing rates over time (Kellermann et al, 2001).

### Coordinated Prosecution

Although the rate juvenile gun homicides occurring in Atlanta and Fulton County as well as nationally markedly increased between 1985 and 1993, the majority of fatal and nonfatal shootings in Atlanta continued involve adults aged 21 years and older. Many adult homicide victims and offenders in Atlanta have prior felony records (unpublished data, Atlanta Police Department and the Georgia Crime Information Service). Interviews with Atlanta area juvenile offenders revealed that adult felons, particularly adult drug dealers, are important sources for guns (Ash, 1997). This led the evaluation team and the intervention partners to conclude that efforts to reduce juvenile gun violence must necessarily target adult felons and gun traffickers as well as juvenile offenders. Therefore, prosecutorial strategies were added:

- **FACE 5** - In an attempt to deter felons from acquiring and/or carrying guns, the Fulton County District Attorney and the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Georgia agreed to work together to identify gun offenders who qualified for federal prosecution under a variety of statutes. The program was dubbed “FACE 5” for “Illegal Firearms in Atlanta Can Equal 5 years in Federal Prison.” FACE 5 was unveiled at a press conference at the Atlanta Federal Courthouse on July 6, 1999. Instead of attempting to incapacitate large

numbers of gun offenders, *FACE 5* seeks to deter adult felons carrying a gun by raising the prospect of federal prosecution and an extended sentence in federal prison. The actual percentage of gun offenders prosecuted under *FACE 5* is small. Through April 2002, a total of 277 investigations were referred for consideration; 108 defendants pled guilty or were found guilty and sentenced or await sentencing, 2 defendants were found not guilty, 51 prosecutions were declined, and 68 were pending action. The other 48 cases were dormant or were dismissed for procedural reasons. Initially, the average sentence in federal prison on a *FACE 5* case was 12 years. Recently, it has dropped to 8 years (unpublished data: Office of the US Attorney for the Northern District of Georgia).

- **Enhanced State-level Prosecution** - Since the majority of gun offenders do not qualify for federal prosecution, the Fulton County District Attorney and the Fulton County Solicitor agreed to seek higher bonds and enhanced penalties for those who are prosecuted in state court. Currently, the Superior Court of Fulton County handles so many violent gun offenses that nonviolent offenses, such as a felon in possession of a firearm, frequently result in a relatively minor sentence or probation. Securing higher bonds increases the financial consequences of being caught with gun, potentially increasing the deterrent value of street-level enforcement. To strengthen and streamline prosecution of handgun offenses, Fulton County District Attorney Paul Howard created an “Illegal Firearms Unit” to focus on gun crimes, speed investigations and prosecutions, and increase the penalties for criminals who repeatedly use guns in the commission of crimes (Howard, 2002).
- **New State laws** - Coincident with these initiatives, state government adopted two complimentary initiatives that strengthened the hand of our local partnership. During its 2000 legislative session, the Georgia General Assembly amended O.C.G.A 16-11-131 to state that any person who is prohibited from possessing a firearm because of a conviction of a forcible felony and subsequently attempts to purchase a firearm shall be guilty of a felony. O.C.G.A. 16-11-131 defines “forcible felony” as any felony that involves the use or threat of physical force or violence against any person. In conjunction with implementation of this law, the Governor of Georgia launched a statewide initiative to reduce gun violence. At his direction, all felony offenders in Georgia who are scheduled for release or parole are now required to sign a legal attestation that they are aware of the amended law and its consequences should they ever attempt to purchase or carry a gun.

On January 1, 2001, at the direction of (then) Governor Barnes, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation began officially advising local law enforcement officers and prosecutors whenever a person convicted of a forcible felony attempts to purchase a firearm from a federal firearm licensee (gun dealer) in their jurisdiction. Notification is made via an electronic message through the state’s Criminal Justice Information System (CJIS). The objective of these initiatives is to deter the acquisition and carrying of firearms statewide by legally proscribed individuals statewide.

## **Objective #5 Implement the intervention in a defined area of Atlanta.**

After careful deliberation, the PACT steering committee decided to focus their efforts in 3 beats in Atlanta Police Department Zone 1, an area with historically high rates of homicide and other violent crimes. Various interventions were phased in over a two-year period, beginning in the fall of 1997. Since the Atlanta Police Department holds primary responsibility for law enforcement within the City of Atlanta, it assumed the lead role for overseeing the intervention within the city limits. The Atlanta Field Office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms took primary responsibility for gun traffickers and federal gun law violators outside the city. The Office of the US Attorney for the Northern District of Georgia and the Fulton County District Attorney's Office agreed to work together to coordinate prosecutions. Other local, state and federal agencies played supporting roles.

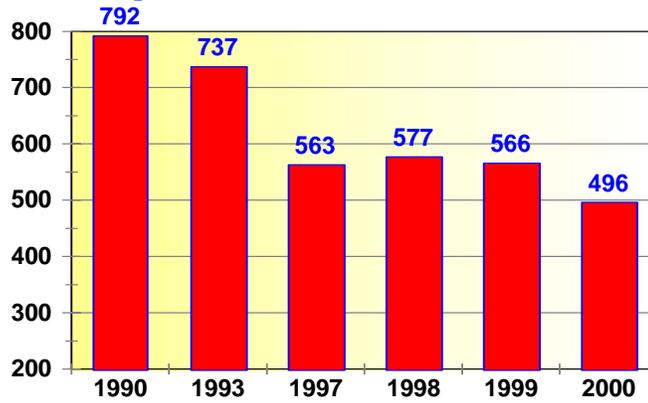
To coordinate the work of different agencies involved in strategic firearms enforcement, three PACT working groups were created. An *Operations Group* was established to coordinate the various local, state and federal law enforcement agencies. It included an Atlanta Police Department major, the lieutenant in charge of the APD's "Guns and Violent Crime Suppression Unit", agents from Atlanta Field Office of the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms, and representatives of other state and local law enforcement agencies. A *Prosecutorial Working Group* was regularly convened to identify cases that qualify as *FACE 5* prosecutions. This group, comprised of representatives of the Atlanta Police Department, the Atlanta Field Office of ATF, the Fulton County District Attorney, and the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Georgia, met bimonthly to review case files and criminal histories. Finally, the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Georgia, the Chief of the Atlanta Police Department, the Special Agent in Charge of the Atlanta Field Office of the ATF, the Fulton County District Attorney, and other state and local agency heads actively participated in the PACT *Steering Committee*, which provided overall coordination and policy direction when needed.

## **Objective #6 Evaluate the impact of the intervention and refine the approach.**

Beginning with presentation of baseline quantitative and qualitative data and continuing throughout Atlanta PACT's effort, the evaluation team shared findings and recommendations with various groups and individuals involved in the intervention. Progress reports, crime maps, and evaluation data were presented to the PACT Operations Group on a monthly basis. Approximately once each quarter, the evaluation team briefed members of the PACT Steering Committee.

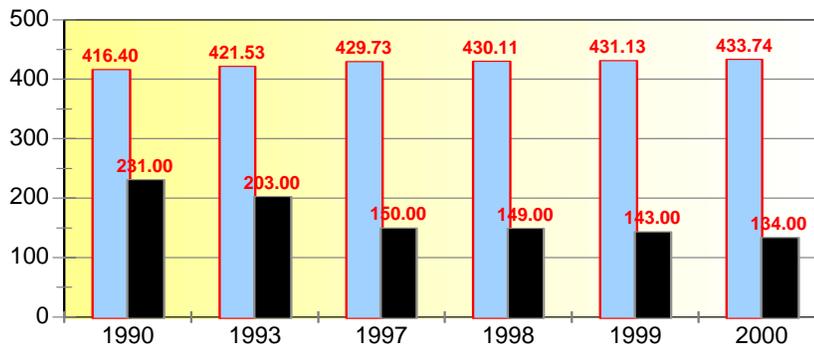
The collaborative effort was formally initiated in 1995. Most of the interventions were implemented over the next several years, and pursued to various degrees. During the first six years following initiation of the collaboration, the annual number of homicides in Atlanta fell 27 percent, from 184 in 1995 to 134 in 2000, the lowest total recorded in the City of Atlanta in 30 years.

### Georgia Homicide Rates in Hundreds



### Atlanta Population Growth v. Homicides

In Thousands/Blue v. In Hundreds/Black



The decline in total homicides was mirrored, at least in part, by changes in public opinion about the problem of juvenile violence. Between 1995, when our first survey of metro Atlanta adults was conducted, and 1999, when the third edition of the survey was completed, the percentage of survey participants in Atlanta PACT counties that considered juvenile crime a “very” or “somewhat” serious problem in their county decreased significantly. The most notable decrease occurred among respondents living in Fulton County, where the PACT intervention was focused. Even larger reductions were noted when we asked respondents to quantify their perception of the seriousness of juvenile crime in the metro Atlanta area *overall*. Paradoxically, respondents to the 1999 edition of the survey were more apt than respondents to the 1995 and 1996 versions to report that juvenile crime had *worsened* during the previous year.

Can the improvement in Atlanta’s homicide rate be credited to the Atlanta PACT intervention? Probably not. It is extremely difficult to ascribe broad population effects to a specific intervention, particularly one that involves multiple components (Dunworth, 2000, Cook and Laub, 2002). The decline in homicides that was noted in Atlanta during the latter half of the 1990s is gratifying, but there are several reasons to believe that the Atlanta PACT interventions had little to do with it. First, Atlanta’s homicide count began to fall 5 years prior to initiation of the PACT intervention. Second, the evaluation team noted several problems with the implementation of key components of the intervention that probably limited its impact. Some of these are described in the final section of our report. Third, if the Atlanta PACT’s intervention

deserves credit for the drop in Atlanta homicides that occurred between 1995 and 2000, we would expect that the greatest decrease would occur in the beats that were the focus of the intervention. This was not the case. Fourth, Atlanta's downward trend in homicide began before the PACT interventions were fully implemented. Finally, although the decline in Atlanta homicides that took place in the 1990's was substantial, similar declines in homicide were noted statewide as well as nationally. This suggests that the decrease was due to broad historical factors or policies, rather than specific elements of the Atlanta PACT intervention.

## V. Lessons learned

Over the life of the intervention, the evaluation team learned a number of important lessons about applying the problem-solving approach to a community problem as complex as juvenile gun violence.

### **Lesson One: Building effective partnerships from scratch takes enormous energy and time.**

Our project was originally conceived as a two-year evaluation. Key elements of the work plan included compilation and analysis of baseline data, presentation of findings to participating agencies, consultation with the stakeholders to devise a complimentary set of strategies, post-implementation evaluation to determine if the interventions were having their desired effect, and subsequent refinement of the effort. Each step took much longer to unfold than anyone expected.

The initial process of compiling baseline quantitative and qualitative data, and sharing it with local stakeholders, was an arduous but relatively straightforward process. Translating these findings into action was a different matter altogether. Many successful partnerships are dependent on personalities, rather than organizational structure. This one was no exception. The evaluation team noted that the structure and organizational philosophy of a particular agency was less important in determining effectiveness than the attitudes the individuals assigned to work on the project. The same could be said for the leadership of each organization. The inevitable changes in leadership that occurred from time to time also influenced group dynamics and slowed progress towards our goal.

### **Lesson Two: Achieving a conceptual consensus about the importance of a problem does not guarantee that a practical consensus will be reached on how to address it.**

Everyone involved in the effort agreed that reducing juvenile gun violence is a worthy goal. However, opinions differed on the best way to achieve it. It was clear from the outset that officials from different PACT counties held widely differing perceptions of the magnitude of the problem in their respective jurisdictions. Stakeholders in the city of Atlanta acknowledged that youth gun violence was a major problem, and were eager and willing participants from the outset. Representatives from Fulton County government (which includes most of the City of Atlanta) shared this view. However, officials from the other 4 counties in the original PACT coalition were reluctant willing to commit significant personnel and resources to the problem, either because they perceived it as less serious, or they thought that they already had it under control. One local official put it this way - "Why should I detail my officers to a metro (area) task force, when they'll spend all

their time outside my county?" Over time, those who were not invested in solving the problem withdrew from the coalition. This left a smaller and more geographically concentrated group of partners to move forward.

The community consensus that quickly coalesced around the issue of juvenile gun violence unraveled with equal speed. Members of the faith community, regarded by African American citizens in metro Atlanta as key players in combating juvenile gun violence, were not initially offered a role. When overtures were made at a later point in time, no one emerged from the faith community to assume a leadership role. None of the other partners in the effort adequately defined one for them. Community nonprofits, an important source of services and after school activities for at-risk juveniles, initially came to the table, but quickly left when they realized that the initiative did not have financial resources to enhance their programs. State and local juvenile justice agencies wanted to participate as full partners, but they could not sustain meaningful involvement in the effort in the face of overwhelming caseloads, inadequate resources, and competing demands. This left a small but potent group of federal, state and local prosecutors and law enforcement agencies to continue the effort.

**Lesson Three: In the "real world" of community problem-solving, evaluators cannot remain aloof from the decision-making process.**

Industrial engineers are familiar with the "Hawthorne effect" the idea that observing behavior invariably changes it. During the early phases of the PACT effort, the evaluation team attempted to keep a respectful distance from the decision-making process. It soon became apparent that this was neither practical nor wise. The job of collecting baseline data and sharing it with program participants inexorably drew us into the effort. The responsibility to provide feedback when and where needed reinforced this role. When the initiative began to lose momentum, the evaluation team felt compelled to assume a more active role to refocus attention on the problem. Efforts included "shuttle diplomacy" between partners, active dissemination of data, called meetings with key stakeholders, and importation of experts from other cities to offer advice. Throughout the effort, the evaluation team repeatedly urged participants to focus on a manageable set of synergistic tactics, rather than diffusing efforts on a broad range of interventions.

**Lesson Four: Local data are needed to prompt local action.**

Despite a substantial literature on the Epidemiology of gun violence, and preliminary evidence from Kansas City, Boston and other cities that proactive policing can be effective, many Atlanta officials viewed these findings with skepticism. The evaluation team was frequently admonished that "Atlanta isn't Boston". To overcome resistance to ideas generated elsewhere, the evaluation team studied Atlanta's juvenile gun violence problem in detail, shared their findings, and used these data to prompt consideration of particular strategies and tactics. (Sherman, Shaw and Rogan 1995; Kennedy 1997; Ash 1997; Decker, Pennell, and Caldwell, 1997)

Ultimately, local data rather than national statistics made the difference. For example, local data revealed that the surge in Atlanta homicides in the late 80s and early 90s was driven almost entirely by an increase in gun murders of juveniles and young adults under the age of 25. (Figure 2) GIS mapping helped officials understand that the majority of shootings in Atlanta take place in localized "hot spots" of violent

crime. This helped officials understand that shootings occur in predictable patterns rather than as isolated and individually unpredictable events. Subsequent qualitative research with incarcerated juvenile offenders generated practical ideas about how to deter the illegal acquisition and carrying of firearms. Not surprisingly, the strategies and tactics that emerged from this process closely resembled several that have been implemented elsewhere. (Bilchik 1999, Dunworth 2000, Lizotte and Shepard, 2001)

**Lesson Five: Successful collaboration requires suspension of self-interest.**

Law enforcement practitioners speak of the 3 "C's" of successful interagency efforts - Communication, Cooperation, and Coordination. A fourth "C" - "Compromise" could be added to this list. Concerns about "turf" surfaced repeatedly throughout the project. Many participants were reluctant to share investigative files and other tactical information. Although concerns were rarely voiced in public, several stakeholders harbored reservations about the feasibility of the effort. A number of agency heads were unwilling to commit precious resources to a venture that they could not control. Others were concerned that they would not receive a fair share of the credit if the effort succeeded.

**Lesson Six: It is difficult to focus on long-term objectives when faced by short-term problems.**

Policy initiatives are not implemented in a vacuum. Exigencies may intervene. Since none of the agency heads involved in the effort had personnel to spare, a decision to back the project meant diverting people and/or resources from other programs. At several points in the process, implementation was delayed because more pressing concerns took priority. For example, the Olympic Park bombing in downtown Atlanta and the massive investigation and manhunt it triggered diverted substantial manpower and resources from the PACT effort. Considerable time elapsed before the manpower of the Atlanta Field Office of ATF could be redeployed to local efforts like the Atlanta PACT initiative.

Despite a lack of funds and a chronic shortage of officers, the Atlanta Police Department strongly supported the endeavor. Meanwhile, APD retained its obligation to promptly answer tens of thousands of emergency 911 calls and investigate every violent crime in a timely manner. In light of these operational imperatives, it was not easy for APD to dedicate personnel to a new and largely untested endeavor.

**Lesson Seven: Change comes slowly to large and complex organizations.**

Large organizations, particularly those that have done things a particular way for a long time, can be very resistant to change. Resistance can take many forms, but the effect is the same – innovation is delayed, altered, or thwarted. The evaluation team encountered all 3 forms of resistance during the course of its efforts.

For example, shortly following national dissemination of the findings of the Boston gun use reduction strategy (Kennedy, Piehl and Braga, 1996), the evaluation team broached the idea of implementing a gang-based strategy in Atlanta. At an early point in the process, the evaluation team brought a delegation of researchers and law enforcement professionals from Boston to Atlanta to brief local officials about their program. Despite evidence that Boston's efforts had a favorable impact on youth homicide, the idea of adopting a similar program in Atlanta was rejected. Local officers maintained that Atlanta's gangs are smaller, more mobile and less

hierarchical than those of Boston, that gang "turf" is less of an issue in Atlanta, and that gang affiliations in Atlanta shift too quickly for members to be used as levers to modify gang behavior.

Mixed results were obtained with a second idea. Armed with documentary evidence that Atlanta's gun violence problem is geographically concentrated in "hot spot" neighborhoods, and that the benefit-risk calculations of most juvenile offenders favor carrying a gun, the evaluation team urged the Atlanta Police Department to implement proactive police patrols to deter illegal carrying and use. This tactic, first described by Sherman and colleagues in their report, "The Kansas City Gun Experiment", subsequently validated by McGarrell and colleagues in Indianapolis (Sherman, Shaw and Rogan, 1995 and McGarrell et al, 2001). To lend impetus to the idea, Professor Sherman was brought to Atlanta to present his findings.

APD responded by developing a "Guns and Violent Crime Suppression Unit" to target illegal gun carrying in hot spot neighborhoods during peak days and hours of gun violence activity. A pilot test of the concept was implemented in three high-crime beats in APD zone 1, an area historically associated with extremely high rates of gun assault and homicide. Over the next year, the unit generated a substantial number of firearm-related arrests and confiscations of illegal firearms, but it did not achieve its fundamental objective – reduction in firearm-related 911 calls and gun violence (unpublished data, Atlanta Police Department). We believe that this failure was due to important differences in how the tactic was implemented in Atlanta compared to Kansas City and Indianapolis. Instead of focusing on deterrence through proactive patrols and high-visibility enforcement, APD's "Guns Unit" concentrated on generating gun seizures and arrests. Residents of the affected neighborhoods were not directly advised of the effort. The program received little coverage by local news media. Lack communication probably undermined the intervention's deterrent effect.

More important, Guns Unit personnel noted that regular APD units tended to shift their patrols to other beats whenever the Guns Unit appeared in the area. This meant that the unit essentially replaced, rather than supplemented, the regular police presence in the target beats. Furthermore, we observed that the unit's days and hours of activity rarely overlapped with the peak hours of gun violence in the target beats.

## **VI. Next Steps**

Problem-solving policing, with or without a research partner, emphasizes data collection, problem definition, strategy development, implementation, reassessment, and when necessary, refinement or modification of the intervention. The researchers and practitioners involved in this effort worked through every stage of this process in an energetic and sustained effort to achieve their objectives. Over time, bonds of trust were created that have served Atlanta in good stead. On the strength of our interagency relationships and willingness to innovate, Atlanta was chosen as one of 10 national sites for a successor program to PACT, known as "Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative" or SACSI ([http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/sacsi\\_01.html](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/sacsi_01.html)). In several cities, including Atlanta, elements of SACSI were subsequently incorporated into an even more comprehensive Department of Justice initiative entitled, "Project Safe Neighborhoods" (Project

Safe Neighborhoods, 2001).

The Atlanta partnerships currently working on Project Safe Neighborhoods are benefiting from the baseline and interval data, problem-solving methodologies, and working relationships that were painstakingly developed through the Atlanta PACT and SACSI interventions. Although PACT initially focused on reducing juvenile gun violence, the subsequent iterations of the intervention targeted adult gun offenders as well. Many of the strategies that are currently cornerstones of the Atlanta Project Safe Neighborhoods intervention, including use of proactive patrols, systematic tracing of crime guns, anti-trafficking efforts, identification of high-risk offenders, and enhanced prosecution in state and federal courts were initially conceived through the PACT and SACSI interventions (figure 3).

## **VII. Conclusion**

Problem-solving research blurs the line between evaluators and those responsible for an intervention. Creating collaborative partnerships between researchers and practitioners presents unique opportunities, but it also involves unique challenges. If pursued with candor, flexibility and persistence, community problem-solving can enhance public safety while simultaneously contributing to a greater scientific understanding of violence prevention and control.

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