



SLAPPING LIPSTICK ON THE PIG (PART I)

Do elaborate violence-reduction initiatives make a difference?

“Given his extensive criminal record, if there was a Federal law against jaywalking we’d indict him for that.”

By *Julius (Jay) Wachtel*. Issued by United States Attorney Don Stern (yes, *Stern*), the pithy threat, which was plastered throughout a violence-ridden Boston neighborhood, was actually part of [Operation Ceasefire](#), a strategy devised by Harvard researchers to combat youth gun violence.

Ceasefire had two components: a law enforcement campaign to curb gun trafficking, thus reduce the supply of firearms, and a so-called “pulling levers” approach intended to reduce the *demand* for guns. Beginning in 1996 gang members in selected crime hot spots were summoned to group meetings where they were warned by police, probation and the Feds that if violence continued serious consequences would follow. Educators, job training specialists and community workers were also on hand to offer alternatives. Posters were put up to spread the word about the project and what happened to those, like Freddie, who dared to ignore it.

<p><u>GOAL: STOP THE VIOLENCE</u></p> <p><u>BOWDOIN STREET OPERATION</u></p> <p>INTERAGENCY OPERATION: POLICE, ATF, PROBATION, PAROLE, DYS, US ATTORNEY, SUFFOLK COUNTY D.A., SCHOOL POLICE</p> <p>SHARE INFORMATION AND INTELLIGENCE DAILY</p> <p>SHUT DOWN DRUG MARKET: WHEN THERE IS VIOLENCE, NO ONE PROFITS</p> <p>HEAVY POLICE PRESENCE: YOUTH VIOLENCE STRIKE FORCE, DISTRICT C-11, DRUG CONTROL UNIT, ATF</p> <p>SWAMP AREA</p> <p>10 ARRESTS</p> <p>70 FIOs</p> <p>MULTIPLE GUN SEIZURES</p> <p>WARRANTS SERVED</p> <p>DISORDER ENFORCEMENT</p> <p>COMMUNITY ORGANIZING</p> <p>HEAVY PROBATION PRESENCE, NIGHT AND DAY:</p> <p>10 SURRENDERS</p> <p>38 HOME VISITS</p> <p>25 FIOs</p> <p>CONTINUOUS AREA CHECKS</p> <p>NEW RESTRICTIONS ON ALL BAILS</p> <p>PATROL WITH YNSF</p> <p>PROBATION INFORMATION</p> <p>SHARED WITH POLICE OFFICERS</p> <p>DYS SURRENDERS: IMMEDIATE</p> <p>HEAVY PAROLE PRESENCE</p> <p>PRIORITY FEDERAL PROSECUTIONS</p> <p>PRIORITY STATE PROSECUTIONS</p> <p>SERVE ALL OUTSTANDING WARRANTS</p> <p>REVIEW ALL POSSIBLE COLD CASES</p>	<p>FREDDIE CARDOZA</p> <p><u>PROBLEM: VIOLENT GANG MEMBER</u></p> <p>“Given his extensive criminal record, if there was a Federal law against jaywalking we’d indict him for that.”</p> <p>—Don Stern, US Attorney</p> <p><u>SOLUTION: ARMED CAREER</u></p> <p><u>CRIMINAL CONVICTION</u></p> <p>Arrested with one bullet</p> <p>Sentence: 19 years, 7 months</p> <p>No possibility of parole</p> <p><u>ADDRESS:</u></p> <p>OTISVILLE FEDERAL</p> <p>CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTE</p> <p>Maximum Security Facility, New York</p>
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Once the notification and publicity phases were done the hammer fell. Cops swarmed problem locations, doing stop-and-frisks and arresting drug dealers, gun possessors and those with outstanding warrants. Probation officers conducted surprise searches. Thanks to United States Attorney Don Stern's enthusiastic participation, felons and drug dealers caught with guns -- or, as in the above example, ammunition - - wound up in Federal court, where bail was rare and sentencing tough. Progress was soon evident. Comparing the two-year implementation period (May 1996 - May 1998) to the five years preceding the intervention, the mean number of monthly gun deaths for ages 24 and under fell sixty-three percent. Citywide gun assaults declined by a quarter.

During 1998-2000 a violence-fighting initiative called [SACSI](#) sought to implement the Ceasefire model in ten cities: Indianapolis, Memphis, New Haven, Portland, Winston-Salem, Albuquerque, Atlanta, Detroit, Rochester and St. Louis. U.S. Attorneys were in charge of each site. Once the preliminaries were done police and the Feds hit the streets with all they had. Their gloves-off approach yielded promising results. Gun assaults in Indianapolis fell 53 percent. Portland enjoyed a 42 percent decrease in homicide.

Although SACSI gave lip service to "pulling levers" [NIJ's own report](#) reveals that for better or worse the focus was overwhelmingly on law enforcement:

Each of the SACSI sites implemented both enforcement and prevention strategies, yet all sites, particularly at the start, emphasized enforcement and prosecution. Many of the initial strategies were enforcement oriented -- targeting hotspots and repeat offenders, crackdowns, sweeps, saturation patrols, serving warrants, and making unannounced visits to probationers....Prevention activities in most sites were meager and implemented late in the SACSI program....(pp. 10, 15)

Evaluators tried to assess the effectiveness of notification and warning strategies. Their conclusions weren't encouraging:

The impact of the lever-pulling approaches was mixed. Three of four sites found that offenders had indeed "heard the message" about new violence bringing swift and certain law enforcement action. Yet, in those same sites, there was no difference in the recidivism rates of lever-pulling attendees and those of comparison groups of offenders. Researchers in Indianapolis found a general deterrent effect due to offenders' awareness of increased police stops, probation sweeps, and the like, rather than their awareness of SACSI "offender notification" meetings and messages. (pp. 4-5)

Federal law treats gun-toting criminals harshly. [Title 18, United States Code, section 924](#), imposes a mandatory minimum 5-year penalty on drug dealers and violent offenders caught with guns. Armed felons with three prior convictions for violence or drug trafficking are subject to a fifteen-year term with no possibility of parole. In 1997 these provisions became the centerpiece of [Project Exile](#), a program intended to rid Richmond (Virginia) of armed thugs.

Unlike Ceasefire, there was no pre-hammer component -- it was all vigorous policing from the very start. Within a year gun homicides were down forty-one percent.

In 2001 the U.S. Justice Department blended components of Ceasefire, SACSI and Project Exile into an anti-violence initiative called [Project Safe Neighborhoods \(PSN\)](#).

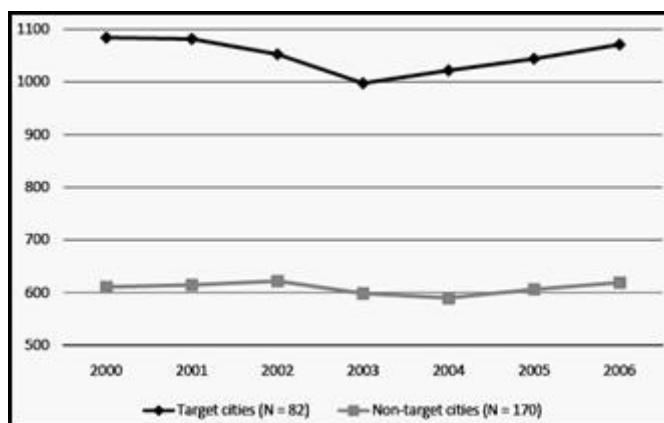


U.S. Attorneys in each judicial district were encouraged to work with mayors, police chiefs, local prosecutors and probation and parole to devise and implement comprehensive, locally-attuned strategies to fight violent crime. Trainers and IT experts were provided. Although the emphasis was on law enforcement, sites were encouraged to incorporate Ceasefire's "pulling lever" components, and many did.

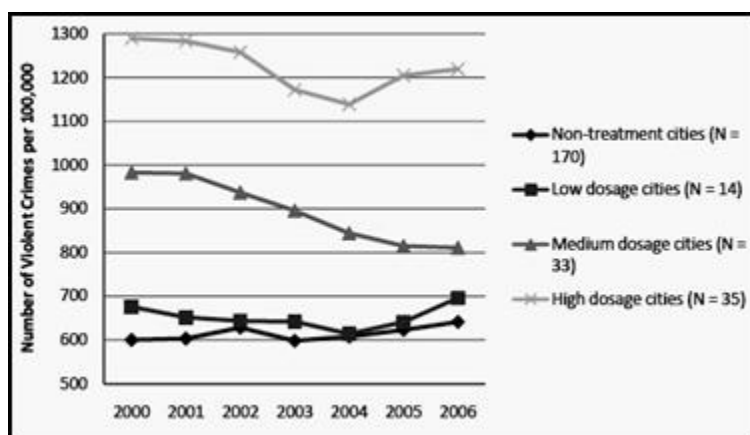
A recently published [evaluation of PSN](#) offers a mixed picture. While Federal prosecutions increased overall, philosophical differences and workload concerns made some U.S. Attorneys and judges reluctant to take on street offenders, whom they viewed as a local responsibility. In districts where PSN took hold the partnerships were mostly among law enforcement agencies rather than the broader spectrum envisioned by Ceasefire. And getting probation and parole involved wasn't always easy, a significant issue given their key monitoring and sanctioning roles. (Probation officers may have been reluctant to play "cop," thus lose credibility with their charges.)

Evaluators identified eighty-two cities where PSN was implemented and 170 cities where it was not. Violent crime rates were compared between the pre-intervention period of 2000-2001 and a four-year period, 2002-2006, when the program was in effect. PSN cities (also called “target” cities) were classified by “dosage”, meaning the program’s rigor -- high, medium or low. (It’s too complicated to go into here, but dosage was measured in a way that heavily weighted law enforcement efforts.) Both PSN and non-PSN cities were also categorized by level of Federal prosecution -- high, medium and low.

Statistical significance aside, PSN’s effects seem insubstantial. Overall, violent crime per 100,000 pop. fell about 4 percent in PSN cities (top trend line) while in non-PSN cities it declined about 1 percent.



PSN’s effects might have been attenuated by weak implementation. As the chart demonstrates, sites higher in “dosage” fared better at the start. (Why the effects of medium dosage persisted, while high dosage did not, is an open question.)



High levels of Federal prosecution seemed helpful for PSN and, to a lesser degree, non-PSN sites, while low levels appeared catastrophic for the latter. Again, there is

some inconsistency, as low level of Federal prosecution is associated with a greater reduction in violence than medium level.

Level of Federal Prosecution	PSN Target Cities	Non-PSN Target Cities
Low	-5.3%	+7.8%
Medium	-3.1%	<-1.0%
High	-13.1%	-4.9%
Total*	-8.89%	-0.25%

*Total percentage change was calculated from the entire target/non-target city data

Whatever their causal mechanism, most gains were wiped out over time. By 2005 the trend in violence was on the upswing for non-PSN cities regardless of prosecution level, for PSN cities at all prosecution levels, and for PSN cities at both low and high dosages of program implementation.

As the PSN evaluation suggests, and as [recent events](#) in Boston, Cincinnati and elsewhere illustrate, lean economic times and other factors can make programs like Ceasefire, SACSI, Project Exile and PSN difficult to sustain. Expending scarce resources on complex partnerships with non-governmental entities and on elaborate techniques such as offender call-ins and notifications raises even more questions. How well such approaches work and whether they add sufficient value to justify their distraction and expense are among the issues we'll look at next week.