

HOW TARGETED DETERRENCE HELPS POLICE REDUCE GUN DEATHS

by Michael Sierra-Arevalo, Yale University

Death by gunfire is a regularly recurring tragedy in the United States. In 2010, for example, 8,775 homicides were committed with a firearm – equal to one gun death for every hour of every day all through the year. Recent mass shootings like those in Aurora, Colorado, and Newtown, Connecticut, make Americans even more worried about gun violence – and there is real cause for concern. One of every five Americans reports personally knowing a victim of gun violence. To put this in perspective, that is thirty-five times higher than the number of people expected to graduate from U.S. colleges in 2013.

Police forces often respond to high levels of gun violence with intensely punitive measures. When crime spreads, a common police response is to flood affected communities with police patrols and make as many arrests as possible. This approach is similar to New York City’s infamous “stop-and-frisk” measures, whereby officers stop and search anyone they believe has committed, is committing, or might commit a crime.

Unfortunately, such indiscriminant approaches rely on inefficient and often discriminatory practices to reduce crime through sheer volume and intensity of policing. Simply put, being tough on crime doesn’t always mean that cops are being smart about the best ways to proceed.

Innovative strategies are emerging, however, one of which – called “focused-deterrence policing” – builds on data about the concentration of gun violence among particular sorts of perpetrators and victims. Unlike sweeps that indiscriminately target entire neighborhoods, focused-deterrence specifically concentrates on the particular sorts of individuals who are at high-risk of committing violence; this approach also focuses on those especially likely to be victimized by gun violence. Focused-deterrence leads police forces to pay extra attention to gang members, felons, and former prisoners under supervision through parole and probation – all of whom are more likely to be shooters or victims. Police look and take action where the offenders and victims are most likely to be.

Who is Involved in Gun Violence?

Even though a surprisingly high proportion of Americans report knowing someone who has been a victim, gun violence is not evenly distributed across the population. Compared to the fifteen percent of white Americans who report knowing a victim, 42% of blacks and 21% of Hispanics say they know one or more. Not surprisingly, personal worries about gun violence also vary by race. Some 62% of blacks and three-quarters of Hispanics report such worries, compared to 30% of whites (still a large percentage, but much lower than for non-whites).

The perpetrators of gun violence are also concentrated in particular sectors of the population. In places like Boston, more than 50% of all murders and 70% of all shootings are committed by

about one percent of youth aged 15 to 24. Many of these young offenders have committed multiple felonies and are members of criminal gangs operating within the city. In fact, more than three-quarters of them have at least one prior arraignment; and six of every ten homicides are classified as “gang related.”

Such patterns are not unique to Boston. Gun violence within cities is driven by very small groups of highly-violent individuals – a fact that belies the popular notion that “violent neighborhoods” are rife with gun-toting young men. In truth, a handful of all the young men within those areas account for the vast majority of shootings and gun murders happening there.

The Turn to Focused-Deterrence Policing

Police forces are increasingly learning to concentrate their efforts to prevent and punish gun violence on the specific segments of the population most likely to be involved. In effect, this approach to police work takes off from the data, summarized above, that indicate which sub-groups of Americans are most likely to be victims of gun violence and which slivers of the population are most likely to contain the culprits.

Initiatives like The Boston Gun Project and Chicago’s Project Safe Neighborhoods allow police to concentrate their efforts on gang-affiliated individuals with previous criminal records. Findings from both cities indicate that real progress has been made and more could follow.

- Rates of gun violence have fallen significantly in the neighborhoods targeted by the Boston Gun Project and Project Safe Neighborhoods: Boston’s youth-homicide rate dropped by 63%, and the homicide rate dropped by 37% in areas targeted by the Chicago efforts.
- At a time when police budgets are shrinking and federal funds to support law enforcement are becoming scarcer, focused-deterrence offers a way to funnel money and personnel to handle those who are most likely to commit gun offenses. This approach also lets police and the community reach-out to people who are the most likely to become victims of gun crime.
- Concentrating on particular “hot spots” and repeat offenders can end up spreading improvements in safety to surrounding areas, too. The data suggest that not only have crime and violence declined in places specially targeted for focused deterrence, but crime reductions have also happened in nearby areas.

Looking to the Future

Research on crime trends in many U.S. cities shows the promise of focused-deterrence strategies for reducing gun violence. This approach has proved effective in metropolises like Chicago and Los Angeles, in medium-sized cities like Boston, Indianapolis, Honolulu, and Cincinnati, and in smaller cities like Rockford, Illinois, and Lowell, Massachusetts. Focused deterrence has also been used to combat the illegal drug trade, indicating its potential to tackle many kinds of crime, including firearms trafficking. The more police can marshal and analyze real-time data to tell them where the most likely perpetrators and victims are to be found, the better they can deploy resources and get solid results.

An extra advantage is that precious law enforcement dollars and man hours can be assigned to communities most in need of enhanced public safety. The focused-deterrence approach works and uses resources efficiently. It is the wave of the future for America’s smartest police forces.