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# **REDUCING GUN VIOLENCE**

**Results from an Intervention in East Los Angeles**

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## Summary

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Violent crime, especially gun homicide, is concentrated in particular locations and populations. It affects cities more than other areas of the United States and is more likely to be committed by and against young males. Within cities, both violent crime and gun homicide by youths are concentrated in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty, drug dealing, and/or gang activity.

One recent response to this concentration of violence has been the Boston Gun Project, formed by a coalition of researchers, community leaders, criminal justice agency representatives, and clergy who researched, designed, implemented, and monitored a project to reduce youth violence by reducing gang and gun violence. Shortly after the launch of the project in 1996, youth homicide fell by about two-thirds in that city.

The Boston experience led the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) to fund RAND to assess whether the process used to reduce gun violence by youths in Boston could be adapted elsewhere. Specifically, the charter was to select an area with a violent crime problem that was amenable to an intervention, analyze the composition of the violence to identify strategies that would address the problem and the resources needed to do so, develop an intervention from among the strategies and resources that was tailored to the composition of the problem, implement the intervention, and evaluate its effect. The Los Angeles Police Department Hollenbeck area—a 15-square-mile area east of downtown Los Angeles that encompasses a population of approximately 200,000 and the communities of El Sereno, Lincoln

Heights, and Boyle Heights—was chosen for the replication. Although the Hollenbeck project was expected to use the basic procedures of the Boston project, particularly leadership by a working group that brought together community leaders, it was also expected that the type of problems addressed and the nature of the intervention might differ from those in Boston, especially given the greater decentralization of criminal justice authorities in Los Angeles.

Crime in the Hollenbeck area is especially violent and involves disproportionate numbers of youths. Reported property crime rates in the area are among the lowest in the city, but the area ranks at or near the top in rates of violent crime, including homicide. Our crime analysis demonstrated, contrary to the perception of some, that little of this violence was related to battles between gangs over control of drug markets. Rather, inter-gang violence more typically dealt with personal or gang honor or prestige. Although its gangs are among the oldest in the city, the area had not previously had a special intervention to combat violence, such as the one the NIJ asked RAND to investigate.

After the Hollenbeck working group was convened, it spent several months considering a plan to quell gang violence in the wake of any triggering event that might lead one gang to retaliate against another. Because the violence was gang-driven, the working group designed a strategy and intervention that leveraged the collective structure of the gang. Among other features, the plan was to include

- increased Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) patrols in the immediate geographic area of the triggering event
- deployment of officers from specialized police units to the broader neighborhood and additional police patrols in public parks
- more-stringent enforcement of housing codes for properties used by gang members and of public housing eligibility rules prohibiting possession of drugs, firearms, and other contraband
- more-stringent enforcement of parole and probation conditions and serving of outstanding warrants on gang members who had committed prior offenses
- referral of gun law violations to federal prosecutors

- dynamic and rapid application of these intervention elements after each violent incident to ensure that perpetrators and victims understood there were consequences for violent behavior.

A brazen “walk-by” gang shooting and resulting double homicide in early October 2000 triggered implementation of the planned intervention in Boyle Heights in the southern portion of the Hollenbeck area. Just prior to this event, community-based organizations responsible for incentives to prevent violence had argued for immediate implementation of sanctions or the law enforcement components of the intervention because of escalating violent crime in the area.

The intervention differed from what was planned in that it was not dynamic. That is, although the intervention was implemented as planned against the first incident, working group members did not constantly reprioritize and reallocate resources after each violent incident but instead focused their efforts almost exclusively on the two gangs involved in the triggering incident and their immediate neighborhoods. Also, the social services that accompanied the Boston initiative were never consistently or widely available in the Hollenbeck intervention, reflecting both the decision to proceed with law enforcement sanctions before social service incentives were in place and the very long time needed to build additional capacity for such social services as job training.

In assessing the effects of the intervention, RAND researchers sought to answer three questions, specifically whether the intervention helped to reduce

- violent crime: homicides, attempted homicides, robberies, assaults, and kidnappings
- gang crime: violent crime and terrorist threats, firearm discharge, vandalism, and graffiti committed by gang members
- gun crime: any of the above crimes that involved use of a firearm.

The analysis compared changes in crime for three periods across three comparison areas. The three time periods were the six months prior to the triggering event—the *pre-intervention* period; the four

months in which all parts of the intervention were applied—the *suppression* period; and the two months in which only selected parts of the intervention were applied, such as heightened patrol of public housing units in the area and greater enforcement of probation and parole regulations—the *deterrence* period. The three comparison areas were (1) Boyle Heights compared with the remainder of the Hollenbeck area, (2) the five police reporting districts where the intervention was targeted compared with the remainder of Boyle Heights, and (3) the Census block groups comprising the turf of the targeted gangs compared with a group of Census block groups scattered throughout Hollenbeck that most closely matched the characteristics of the targeted area.

In Boyle Heights, gang crime decreased significantly compared with other regions of Hollenbeck during the suppression period of the intervention, and violent, gang, and gun crime all decreased significantly in the deterrence period. The data suggest that the significant reduction in gang crime may have begun in the suppression period. Violent crime, however, did not decrease significantly in the suppression period.

In the five targeted police reporting districts, violent crime decreased significantly in comparison with the rest of Boyle Heights in the suppression and the deterrence periods. However, neither gang crime in the deterrence period nor gun crime in the deterrence or suppression periods decreased significantly in comparison with the remainder of Boyle Heights, although the generally low number of gun crimes in the targeted reporting districts makes it difficult to detect significant changes.

In the Census block groups overlapping the targeted reporting districts, violent crime decreased significantly compared with the matched blocks. The data suggest that this significant reduction persisted into the deterrence period. Gun crime decreased significantly in the suppression period, though it returned to pre-intervention levels in the deterrence period. Gang crime did not decrease significantly, although low numbers of these crimes made it difficult to detect significant changes.



In addition to the above formal analyses of the effects of the intervention, RAND researchers examined the effects of the intervention on neighboring areas and gangs. The intervention did not displace crime from the targeted areas and gangs to others; rather, crime decreased in surrounding communities as well.

The replication of the Boston process in Hollenbeck succeeded in that it used data analysis to identify both problems and potential interventions and led a working group like the one in Boston to implement a well-designed intervention that helped reduce gang crime and violent crime in the targeted area. It also succeeded in getting decentralized criminal justice organizations to focus their unique and often disparate resources on a problem in a single area. Community support for the intervention was also high, in large part because of the inclusion of community representatives in the working group process.

Nevertheless, the intervention was not implemented as designed, and it never developed dynamically or in response to changing needs. Part of the reason stems from the reorganization of LAPD gang crime units in response to a scandal involving some gang unit officers who planted evidence and used excessive force. Also, the project did not succeed in getting working group participants, who referred to it as the “RAND study” or the “RAND project,” to view it as their own and seek to continue it. No single agency emerged to take charge of the project and carry it forward, perhaps because of limited resources for the work.

For future projects such as this one to work beyond a trial period, city leaders need to establish processes to support, and hold accountable, agencies in such collaboration. Such efforts would require more information on project costs than was gathered by this effort, which, like similar efforts, focused almost exclusively on measuring the project’s effects on crime reduction. Only with the collection of cost information can a final evaluation be made of whether the effort was worthwhile.