



# OLR RESEARCH REPORT

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## **GUN VIOLENCE REDUCTION IN SMALL U.S. CITIES**

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You asked for examples of U.S. cities similar in population to New Haven (pop. 129,779) that have reduced gun violence and their methods for achieving that reduction.

### **SUMMARY**

Many cities across the United States have made efforts to reduce gun violence, with initiatives at the municipal, state, and federal levels. Project Exile is a federally initiated program in Richmond, Virginia that sought to incapacitate chronic gun offenders and deter potential offenders by prosecuting gun crimes in the federal, rather than state, system. The program has been widely hailed as a success, although reports differ on whether those accolades are deserved. A statewide program in Virginia, hoping to duplicate Richmond's success, has not succeeded in reducing gun violence.

Operation SNUG (Guns backwards) is a state initiated program targeting various cities in New York. The program employs ex-gang members as case workers and deploys them in high-risk areas to act as mentors and interveners. In-depth reports of the program's results have not been published, but published information suggests the program was successful in certain cities. The state has extended its funding for those programs considered most successful.

Project Safe Neighborhoods is a federally initiated program targeting cities and regions throughout the country. Its core strategy for the program is increased federal prosecution, similar to Project Exile, but with an emphasis on partnerships between federal, state and local officials and tailoring its program methods to the specific problems of a target city or region. A report on the program in 2009 found that the program overall had been successful in reducing violent crime in target areas. Case studies of participating cities also showed promising results.

## **PROJECT EXILE**

### ***Richmond, VA***

Richmond is the capital of Virginia, with a population of 204,214. In early 1997, the city implemented Project Exile, a program developed by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia in coordination with the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office and the Richmond Police Department. The program was designed to incapacitate gun offenders and deter future gun crimes by prosecuting violent or drug crimes involving firearms in the federal, rather than state, system. (Federal sentences for such crimes generally are longer than those in state courts, bail is denied more often, and sentences served in federal prisons are likely to be located out of state.) The program also used an "outreach" component, with heavy advertising of stricter penalties and lower tolerance for gun-related crimes.

A 40% reduction in gun homicides in Richmond from 1997 to 1998 led to praise for the program from a variety of observers from across the political spectrum, including former President George W. Bush, the National Rifle Association, Handgun Control, and Virginians Against Gun Violence, as well as news outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

Research analysts, however, offer different opinions as to the program's success in reducing gun crime. Authors of a 2003 analysis of the program argued that the decline in gun homicide was part of a general regression to the mean across U.S. cities with high homicide rates ([Steven Raphael and Jens Ludwig, \*Prison Sentence Enhancements: The Case of Project Exile\*, in \*EVALUATING GUN POLICY\*, 251 \(2003\)](#)). But, authors of a 2005 study examining Project Exile and other gun violence reduction programs disagreed, concluding that Richmond's gun homicide rate fell more rapidly than the rates in other large U.S. cities, with other influences controlled ([Richard Rosenfeld, et. al., \*Did Ceasefire, Compstat, and Exile Reduce Homicide?\* 4 \*CRIMINOLOGY & PUB. POL'Y\* 419 \(2005\)](#)).

## **Virginia Exile**

In 1999, due to the perceived success of Richmond's program, the state legislature amended the law to impose mandatory minimums and increase penalties for certain firearm offenses. To support these changes, the Virginia Exile program was implemented in January 2000, establishing program sites and funding them to hire additional prosecutors and increase public awareness in their jurisdictions. The program's stated purpose was to reduce gun-related violence in participating localities through the arrest, conviction, and sentencing of offenders.

In July 2003, the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services' Criminal Justice Research Center issued a report on the program. Detailed information about state prosecutions of each Virginia Exile charge was collected from the principal evaluation sites. Available data showed that of the 638 Virginia Exile charges brought forward for prosecution, 148 (23%) were transferred to federal court. Of the remaining 490 charges, 174 (36%) resulted in an Exile offense conviction and full mandatory minimum sentence. Firearm and drug seizure data was available for 549 Virginia Exile cases. That data indicated that 448 (82%) cases involved the seizure of at least one firearm, most of which were handguns (74%).

The report's authors concluded that although the state hoped that the program would reduce gun violence, available firearm violence data suggested that the goal was not achieved. Rather, it showed that despite the increased number of prosecutions, levels of nearly all violent offenses committed using a firearm increased in both the Exile localities and statewide in the two years following the implementation of the program  
(<http://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/research/documents/exileFinal.pdf>).

## **OPERATION SNUG**

In 2009, the New York legislature appropriated \$4 million of the FY11 budget to create Operation SNUG, a gun violence reduction program aimed at high risk areas in several cities. Eight target cities or city areas each received \$500,000 to implement the program, which is modeled after Ceasefire, a Chicago-based program. The program employs ex-gang members as case workers and deploys them in high-risk areas to act as mentors and interveners, mediating disputes as they begin to occur. Although the state has elected not to continue funding half the programs, it continues funding those programs considered most successful.

Data on the program's success rate has not yet been published. But some local newspapers and officials have provided information regarding gun violence levels in the target cities, which indicates the programs have had some success.

Four SNUG target cities (Albany, Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers) with populations similar to New Haven and for which information is available are described below.

### ***Albany***

Albany, New York's capital, has a population of 97,856. The city's SNUG program began in October 2010. The program's first year of operation coincided with a 29% drop in shootings in the city over the first eight months of the year, a decline credited in part on the program's emphasis on heading off retaliatory violence before it happens (<http://www.timesunion.com/local/article/State-to-help-restart-SNUG-2272597.php>).

In late 2011, the state identified the program as one of the most successful and provided funding for its continuance.

### ***Rochester***

Rochester has a population of 210,565. The city's SNUG program went fully online at the end of 2010, deploying six high-intensity intervention case workers who targeted gun violence in the neighborhoods with the most persistent violence problems. The results were quite positive, with violent altercations falling to a 10-year low in some of the targeted neighborhoods, according to an official who oversaw the program. Rochester Chief of Police, James Sheppard, announced in June 2011 that the number of shooting victims was down 40% for the first six months of the year, compared to the first six months of a typical year. Also during that span, there were 14 homicides compared to a typical 20 (<http://rocthepeace.org/2011/07/city-shootings-down-in-first-6-months/>).

Despite its apparent success, the state chose not to continue funding for the program. Pathways to Peace, a local program that helped administer SNUG in Rochester, continues to operate and uses similar intervention strategies.

## **Syracuse**

Syracuse has a population of 145,170. The city's SNUG program began in April 2010. According to its director, no gun homicides occurred in the neighborhoods targeted by the program during the period when the mediators were deployed. Syracuse Police Chief Frank Fowler said in 2011, "I think there is a great deal of value in SNUG and in the young men they hired. I think that, yes, SNUG did make a difference here." Fowler specifically identified the program as a factor in reducing the shots-fired calls for the year, although not a significant one (<https://nccnews.expressions.syr.edu/?p=30706>, <http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2011/10/syracuse.html>).

The state chose not to continue funding for the program and the program ended in October 2011.

## **Yonkers**

Yonkers, a city close to New York City, has a population of 195,976. The city's SNUG program began in October 2010. Shootings in Yonkers declined 39%, in the first nine months of 2011 compared with the same period in 2010, according to city crime statistics (<http://www.lohud.com/article/20111116/NEWS02/111160321/Yonkers-anti-gun-program-Andrea-Stewart-Cousins>).

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## **PROJECT SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS**

Since 2001, Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), coordinated by U.S. Attorney's offices, has tried to reduce gun violence across the U.S. The program has targeted several cities and regions, some of which are similar in size to New Haven.

**Implementation.** Like Project Exile, the core strategy of PSN is increased federal prosecution of illegal gun use and illegal gun possession, with the goal of incapacitating chronic violent offenders as well as deterring threat to potential gun offenders. It also recognizes, however, that exclusive reliance on increased federal prosecution is impossible given the reality that most gun crime is prosecuted in state and local courts. Also, there is recognition of the large variability across communities in the U.S. in terms of the level and nature of gun crime and therefore the program allows flexibility to adapt to local context. PSN is framed on five key components: partnerships, strategic planning and research integration, training, outreach, and accountability. The

intent is that these components will maximize the investment of federal resources through a focus on the contexts driving gun crime in particular jurisdictions.

**Results.** An evaluation of the program was issued by Michigan State University's School of Criminal Justice in 2009 and the report's authors concluded that "meaningful" implementation of PSN led to reductions in violent crime. Specifically, PSN target cities experienced less violent crime over time and cities in federal districts with increased federal prosecution had the greatest decline in crime. Additionally, these cities resisted the uptick in violent crime witnessed across the country in 2005 and experienced a much less pronounced increase in 2006 compared to other cities. These results were consistent after controlling four other factors that have been shown to influence levels of violent crime (e.g., concentrated disadvantage, population density, levels of police staffing, incarceration trends) (<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/226686.pdf>).

Case studies of two PSN cities similar to New Haven in population are described below.

### **Lowell, MA**

Lowell is a city in Massachusetts and has a population of 106,519. In 2002, PSN established a task force composed of local and federal law enforcement professionals and research partners from Harvard and Northeastern Universities. Its focus was the city's gun violence problems and intervention.

**Implementation.** Lowell's PSN strategy included (1) an incapacitation strategy focused on a relatively small number of the most serious, chronic federal criminal gun statutes offenders and (2) a focused deterrence strategy geared toward youth gang members. The incapacitation strategy was facilitated by a joint prosecution gun case screening process whereby federal and local prosecutors reviewed cases to ensure that the most serious chronic offenders received the longest sentence in either federal or state court.

The focused deterrence strategy was based on direct communication to at-risk youth gang members through offender notification meetings, increased supervision of probationers, and focused police patrol. An example of this strategy was PSN's targeting adults from the Asian community believed to be involved in gambling operations. They were asked to exert informal social control over Asian youth gangs to get them to desist in gun crime.

**Results.** In 2007, PSN issued a case study on the Lowell program and reported a reduction in aggravated assaults with a firearm, the principle focus of the PSN Lowell task force. It found a 28% reduction, which was considerably larger than that observed in several comparable Massachusetts cities during the same period. The study found no reduction in armed robberies with a gun or in gun-related calls-for-service. Homicides were too infrequent to assess an impact ([http://www.psn.gov/pubs/pdf/BJA\\_PSN\\_case6.pdf](http://www.psn.gov/pubs/pdf/BJA_PSN_case6.pdf)).

### **Montgomery, AL**

Montgomery is the capital of Alabama and has a population of 205,764. In 2002, PSN established a task force composed of local and federal law enforcement professionals focusing specifically on Montgomery's as well as the surrounding area's gun violence problems and intervention.

**Implementation.** Montgomery's PSN strategy was roughly modeled on Project Exile, as the task force sought to increase the penalties for illegal possession and use of guns, particularly by chronic offenders. Partnerships with local law enforcement were established to increase the flow of gun cases from local law enforcement to the U.S. Attorney's Office. A joint gun case screening process was established, and the city sought to increase federal prosecution significantly. The city also employed a communication strategy using billboards, posters, and radio and television advertisements.

**Results.** In 2007, PSN issued a case study on the Montgomery program. The study found an increase of defendants prosecuted in federal court for gun cases from 21 in FY00 to 103 in FY03. Time series analyses were conducted to compare the trends in homicides, gun assaults, and armed robberies in Montgomery with the trend in property crime during the same time period. The results suggested a decrease in gun assaults and homicides but no impact on armed robberies. The data indicated an approximately 13% reduction in gun assaults per year, and an approximately 23% reduction in homicides per year. There was no impact on property crime, suggesting that the gun crime reduction was caused by PSN, as opposed to being part of an overall trend ([http://www.psn.gov/pubs/pdf/BJA\\_PSN\\_case5.pdf](http://www.psn.gov/pubs/pdf/BJA_PSN_case5.pdf)).

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