

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reducing Street Violence in Allegheny County



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Allegheny County Department of Human Services

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) is dedicated to meeting the human services needs of county residents, particularly the county's most vulnerable populations, through an extensive range of prevention, intervention, crisis management and after-care services.

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THE ISSUE

Homicide is a serious problem in Allegheny County — far worse than many people think. Although a recent survey found that most Allegheny County residents said that they feel safe in their neighborhoods,¹ the four-year homicide rate in the City of Pittsburgh, at 14.5 homicides per 100,000 people, is higher than the average of all cities of similar size in the U.S. (12 homicides per 100,000 people). It also is higher than in New York City (5.9 per 100,000) and only marginally lower than the rate in Washington, D.C. (19.2 per 100,000). Several areas of the county, such as Clairton, Duquesne, Wilkinsburg and McKeesport, have disturbingly high rates of homicide, at a combined average of 27.1 homicides per 100,000 people.

¹ The Pittsburgh Regional Quality of Life Survey found that most people in Allegheny County feel safer in their neighborhoods than in other locations and crime has not gotten worse (July 2012).

The majority of county homicides are the result of shootings from street violence, as distinguished from domestic violence or family disputes, and the people who commit these acts are involved with groups of individuals who engage in criminal activity together.² The two dominant causes of these homicides by group members, as identified by law enforcement, are disputes (in 70 percent of the homicides) and drug-related reasons (in 21 percent of the killings).

² A 2010 analysis by the University of Cincinnati Policing Institute (UCPI) looked at three years of homicides in the City of Pittsburgh, drawing upon information from the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police across shifts and zones. The UCPI found that nearly 70 percent of homicides were committed by people involved with a gang. The definition of gang used in that report, and in this report as well, is “groups of individuals who engage in criminal activity together.” (UCPI, March 2010)

Homicide is “at the top of a much broader swell of violence” (Loeber, 2008). One study of Pittsburgh youth found that those with criminal behaviors reported committing 38 violent offenses for every one offense that was ever brought to the attention of the court (Loeber, 2014). Loeber and others have made the point that the criminal justice system is not aware of the “large proportion of victimization that goes on in the community, and that justice oriented interventions can address only a very small proportion of all crime committed” (Loeber, 2014).

Perhaps the reason that most people in the county feel safe is that street violence is happening in places where they do not live or work. It takes place in relatively few areas of the county, at discrete locations within neighborhoods. These “micro places” are as finite as a particular intersection or block.

While the violence is geographically very focused, it dramatically affects the surrounding neighborhoods, with families fearful about allowing their children to play outside and older adults afraid to walk to the bus stop. There is a sense that anyone could get caught in the crossfire.

Street violence takes place in relatively few areas of the county, at locations even smaller than the neighborhood level.

Without a break in the intensity of violence, it is difficult for people who live in these communities to feel safe, let alone hold together the social fabric of their neighborhood. Yet citizens across the city and county continue to try.

This is a battle that the community cannot wage alone. It requires collaboration among community members and agencies of the criminal justice and human services systems, and it takes the discipline of focusing on those at highest risk using specific strategies that have been proven to reduce violence.

This focused, evidence-based approach has reduced the violence in other cities and counties, and it can work here, too.

HOW CAN WE REDUCE STREET VIOLENCE?

This report describes what is contributing to the problem of street violence, what research shows to be effective in reducing shootings, and what has been done about this issue in Allegheny County. It then makes recommendations of strategies that can achieve reductions in street violence within one to five years.

This approach has reduced the violence in other cities and counties, and it can work here, too.

The process used to prepare this report included interviews with over 50 local practitioners who shed light on violence prevention programs; reviews of these and other local, state and national programs and their documented results; research on the roots of violence and on evidence-based practices; and discussions with Drs. Al Blumstein, David Harris, David Kennedy, Rolf Loeber, Ed Mulvey, Daniel Nagin and George Tita, whose nationally and internationally respected research in criminal justice and delinquency provides direction for city and county officials responsible for our public welfare and safety.

Where to focus

A review of available research makes several things clear:

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We need to focus on the small number of adults and juveniles who shoot because they are part of a group/gang. These individuals are linked to the five to 100 others in their network (UCPI, 2010) and these networks exert strong influence on group members. It is important to understand that groups act in ways that are contextually rational, i.e., responding to what they believe is the risk of apprehension.

Research has shown that it is this “perceived risk of apprehension” that deters criminals, not prison itself or the threat of long sentences (Durlauf & Nagin, 2009; Nagin, 2013). If gangs believe that this will impact the whole group — that group members will be caught when one of their own shoots someone — then their leaders will exert pressure on the members to stop shooting. Over 10 cities have successfully leveraged this group dynamic to reduce violence (Braga & Weisburd, 2012).

Building a cycle of trust between the police and the community is a public safety imperative.

How we exert pressure on groups matters. If done in a way that truly focuses on the violent offenders — for example, the 1,500 group members in Pittsburgh whom police and community members know are committing the violence and, in particular, the estimated 84 group members with influence over the groups (UCPI, 2010) — then community members are more likely to share information about offenders. If, however, the community sees the entire neighborhood being saturated by police who sweep up youth and adults who are not involved in street violence, they may view the police as unfair and illegitimate, and see no value in risking retaliation by assisting police. Building a cycle of trust between the police and the community is a public safety imperative: when the community views the police as fair and acting in its interest, residents are more likely to step forward to identify the criminals (Tyler & Fagan, 2008).

We also need to focus on **individual issues that fuel violence** by those in groups and those who are not, particularly substance use disorders and other behavioral health issues. Alcohol has been implicated in violent crimes, yet most offenders with substance use disorders do not receive treatment (Mulvey, Schubert & Chassin, 2010), even though effective treatment has been shown to reduce offending. An analysis of a large-scale survey found that the incidence of violence was significantly higher for the subset of people with co-occurring mental illness and substance abuse (Elbogen & Johnson, 2009).

If we can identify these very-high-risk individuals and provide them with effective treatment and services, we can reduce the likelihood that they will become violent offenders and increase the prospect that more offenders will desist from violent crime.

What works... and where we stand

Cities have used the following strategies³ to shift the behavior of groups and address the needs of high-risk individuals. The effects of these strategies are more powerful when joined together into a systematic effort to reduce street violence.

Focused deterrence

This strategy uses various “levers” to influence group members to reduce homicides. One lever is the threat of prosecution. Law enforcement gathers evidence it could use to prosecute each of the individuals in the group, and then shares this information with the group’s members to let them know that, if there is another shooting, all of them could be arrested and prosecuted for the crimes already known to the police. At the same meeting in which law enforcement delivers

³ The authors of this report limit the list of “what works” to strategies with strong studies that include a specific impact on violence. The complete report includes a list of other criminal justice strategies examined; some had positive effects but did not measure an impact on violence. A few were shown to be harmful.

this message, community members speak up to make it clear to group members that they and their neighbors want the violence to stop, and human services providers offer assistance (e.g., employment, housing and treatment) for those group members who want an alternative to criminal activity.

Focused deterrence can provide the break in the violence that communities need.

A focused deterrence strategy requires considerable preparation, including identifying the specific members of various groups and determining how these groups relate to one another; building the cases; determining points of leverage; putting in place the human services that can respond quickly and with concrete help; and finding community members willing to step forward to speak with the group members. To be taken seriously, this alliance of law enforcement, human services and community must then deliver on both the offers of help and the consequences of further violence.

When done well and incorporated as a regular part of law enforcement, focused deterrence can provide the break in violence that communities need to strengthen their efficacy.

Examples of successful programs include Boston Ceasefire, Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence and Indianapolis Violence Reduction Partnership.

Local implementation: Pittsburgh's focused deterrence program, called the Pittsburgh Initiative to Reduce Crime (PIRC), has not been implemented with all of the core elements of the proven strategy. Missing is the police involvement in developing the information to identify the group members to target and in building the cases. The practitioners interviewed for this report said that, without the police's involvement, the message to the group members has not had the teeth necessary. In the meantime, police continue to saturate areas. It is not clear whether local police leadership views preventing violence as part of its mission.

Despite this, interviews with local law enforcement officials indicate that they believe that focused deterrence works and is well worth trying again with police and leaders who will fully embrace the approach.

Violence interrupters

In ways that complement focused deterrence and affect the group dynamic, violence interrupters are individuals who work on the street to stop the shootings by paying close attention to what the community and gang members are saying about the disagreements between groups. These interrupters, who may have been involved with the gangs but have moved away from criminal activity, detect the possibility of violence, work to mediate disputes, and provide important information to law enforcement to prevent violence. With the help of trained outreach workers, violence interrupters connect group members with human services and, in a handful of cases, have worked with law enforcement and the courts to move individuals at high risk of being shot to another part of the state or country.

Because violence interrupters often have their own criminal histories, law enforcement may reject their assistance. But studies of violence interrupter programs show that they have reduced retaliatory killings and increased the flow of street-level intelligence to police.

An example of a successful program is CURE Violence, operating in Baltimore, Chicago and Brooklyn.

Local implementation: Violence interrupters have not operated outside of the City of Pittsburgh. The violence interrupter program known as One Vision One Life operated within the City of Pittsburgh for nearly a decade and included a hospital-based element, but placed a wider range of demands on its staff, had less coordination with police than was required, and did not focus as heavily on active gang members in a way shown to reduce violence. The newly-formed Community Violence Prevention Project, modeled on a promising practice in Baltimore, is trying to stem the tide of retribution killings. Operated by the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health, it engages gunshot victims in services and supports when they arrive at a local trauma hospital. The initiative also conducts homicide reviews. The Community Violence Prevention Project will begin measuring its impact on shootings after it is fully implemented. YouthPlaces provides summer employment and afterschool programs throughout the county; while its primary mission has not been to serve as violence interrupters,

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it does bring gang members together in positive ways. The Youth Opportunities Development (YOD), which has conducted street outreach for PIRC, received strong endorsements from interviewees for its capacity to reach and engage potentially violent individuals and may therefore be a logical choice to consider in building a violence interrupter program.

Directed patrols that target illegal guns and ammunition

Police can increase the risk of apprehension by conducting directed patrols of areas where there is probable cause of illegal gun-carrying. These directed patrols, composed of trained and well-supervised officers, target high-risk places at high-risk times, within constitutional bounds. This strategy requires an understanding of the ways in which it could enhance or erode police legitimacy (and therefore the public's willingness to assist police).

Examples of successful programs include the Kansas City and Indianapolis crime gun intervention strategies.

Local implementation: From 1998 through 2000, the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police carefully selected and trained a firearm suppression patrol that was shown to reduce the number of illegal guns and “may have reduced shots fired by as much as 34 percent” (Cohen & Ludwig, 2003). Operating outside the city, but involving redeployed City of Pittsburgh police and other law enforcement agencies, the Violence Control and Gun Unit (2006 through 2009) brought federal indictments for illegal firearms against gang members

in the Braddock area. This effort was disbanded when the forfeiture money that funded it ran out. More recently, the Allegheny County Police have organized the Violent Criminal Assessment and Strategic Targeting Initiative (VICAST), a working group of local, state and federal law enforcement agencies that is identifying repeat violent offenders and groups, sharing information and resources, and mounting long-term investigations that can lead to the arrest of high-impact offenders. In 2013, VICAST was credited with a series of raids in Munhall, West Mifflin and Homestead that led to the arrest and federal grand jury indictment of 34 gang members. The FBI's Safe Streets Violent Crime Initiative and the U.S. Department of Justice's Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces also work with local jurisdictions to investigate and build cases involving high-impact drug and gun crimes.

Targeting high-risk juveniles and adults for evidence-based treatment and services

Reducing violence in the next five years is not only about stopping the groups that already have formed. It also involves taking steps to prevent youth from becoming enmeshed in violence and providing a pathway out of criminal involvement for those youth and adults who are already at high risk of committing and becoming victims of street violence. This calls for a strategy to identify these individuals, assess their needs, quickly respond with services that address those needs, and monitor them to make sure that they are no longer at high risk of being a victim or violent offender.

Reducing violence in the next five years also means taking steps to prevent youth from becoming enmeshed in violence and providing a pathway out of criminal involvement.

This strategy requires a core set of evidence-based services and a commitment to ensuring that high-risk individuals actually receive these services. It also calls for a consistent mechanism to identify and assess high-risk youth and adults wherever they might access services or become known to a service system. Once these youth and adults have been identified and assessed, there is a relatively small set of programs that have been shown to change their decisions and build appropriate skills. In general, these are cognitive-based treatments of sufficient length and intensity, and drug and alcohol treatment programs.

Examples of successful strategies for identifying and intervening with youth include the Michigan Early Offender Program and the Toronto Under 12 Outreach Project, which target early intervention to high-risk children and youth and provide a centralized police protocol.

Local implementation: Allegheny County has invested in evidence-based violence prevention programs for children, youth and families, including Stop Now and Plan (SNAP), Aggression Replacement Training (ART) and Multisystemic Therapy (MST); programs for adult offenders, such as those instituted by the Jail Collaborative and Juvenile Probation, which are reducing recidivism; and substance abuse treatment at sites across the county. Some criminal justice divisions, including Adult Probation, Juvenile Probation and the Allegheny County Jail, also follow best practices by assessing delinquents and offenders for risk level and needs and then targeting the

most intensive interventions to the highest-risk individuals. None of this, however, ensures that serious violent offenders are being directed to appropriate services, and there currently is no way to measure how many of the serious violent offenders who need these services are actually receiving them.

In summary, local interviews and reviews of program evaluations indicate that Allegheny County has tried each of the strategies known to be effective in reducing violence, but several are no longer in place or are being implemented without key elements. Given the rate of violence in the city and county, it is time to implement a balanced portfolio of proven strategies, and to do so with fidelity to the proven model.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To increase the safety of Allegheny County's residents and to provide the break in violence that communities need to rebuild, we recommend the following:

1. Police in the City of Pittsburgh and the municipalities most affected by street violence should fully adopt a focused deterrence approach that strives to reduce shootings and build police legitimacy within their communities. Each should designate a police official who is responsible for overseeing the implementation of focused deterrence in their respective police department.

In support of this recommendation, and given past experience in the City of Pittsburgh, we recommend that the mayor:

- Ensure that the new police chief and public safety director view preventing violence as part of their mission and fully support making focused deterrence a regular part of policing, including making it a priority to collect and share the intelligence required to put focused deterrence into effect
 - Designate a police official responsible for overseeing the implementation of the program, ensuring that evaluation data are collected and utilized to make changes in the program as warranted
 - Hire a strong leader to rejuvenate the commitments of this police-criminal justice-human services-community effort and to continue to coordinate the effort with the Chief of Police.
2. The Allegheny County Jail Collaborative, Adult Probation and Juvenile Probation should work with city and other police departments to plan ways in which they can "pull levers" that are unique to the jail and probation. These include sending a clear message to each gang-involved and violent offender or delinquent that Probation will carefully monitor them for violent illegal activity and follow through with more intensive supervision.

3. As part of a focused deterrence strategy, the city and county should consider funding a CURE Violence model in the most violent areas of Allegheny County; priority should be given to implementing the model with fidelity.
4. The Community Violence Prevention Project should adopt best practices in its homicide review process (e.g., the effective practice used in Milwaukee).
5. Police departments in the City of Pittsburgh and other municipalities in Allegheny County should train police in how to enhance police–community relationships (both the rationale for and approaches to building police legitimacy) and measure and report to the public on the health of police–community relationships.
6. Federal, state and local law enforcement agencies should continue cross-jurisdictional efforts to reduce the number of illegal guns and the amount of illegal ammunition in the city and county through well-trained and supervised officers, while respecting constitutional bounds and satisfying the requirements of police legitimacy.
7. The Allegheny County Department of Human Services and Allegheny County Juvenile Probation should develop a comprehensive plan for identifying and treating youth at very high risk of future violence. Components of the plan should include:
 - Selecting (or creating) an assessment that can be used to identify these young people across systems: within schools, the child welfare system, juvenile probation, and by family and community agencies
 - Developing the mechanisms for ensuring that these high-risk youth and their families are referred to and receive appropriate services; monitoring progress; and directing them to other interventions, as needed
 - Conducting an inventory of programs currently available in the county that are incorporating effective practices with fidelity; assessing the degree to which high-risk youth are being served through these programs (for example, determining if youth served by Juvenile Probation are enrolled in programs like SNAP and ART); and, where there are gaps in these services for high-risk youth, making additional investments in evidence-based programs that reduce aggression and violence
 - Giving careful consideration to increasing funding in order to reduce the caseloads of the juvenile probation officers handling the highest-risk cases and to fully implementing a system of graduated sanctions for juveniles on probation
8. The Allegheny County Jail Collaborative should develop a plan for identifying and treating adults at high risk of committing or being victims of street violence. This could include identifying and targeting intensive services and treatment to inmates and probationers at high risk because of their group affiliation and/or assessments of substance abuse or mental health issues. Such a shift would not only reduce recidivism, but it could also reduce the number of homicides in the city and county.

9. Those organizations that share in the work of reducing street violence should commit to reporting their progress using a common set of measures, including indicators that demonstrate that they are reaching high-risk youth and adults, as well as indicators of their impact on shootings, homicides and other violent crime.
10. Police should share data and intelligence across jurisdictions to enhance their ability to track groups and crimes across borders and support their coordinated strategies.
11. City and county agencies should develop sustainable funding approaches to reducing street violence.