

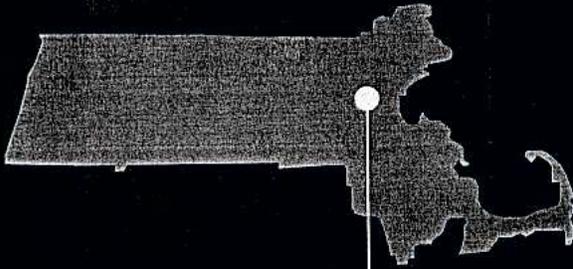
David Kennedy
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U.S. Department of Justice
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RESEARCH REPORT

Reducing Gun Violence



THE
BOSTON
GUN PROJECT'S
OPERATION CEASEFIRE

NIJ

Reducing Gun Violence

The Boston Gun Project's Operation Ceasefire

Developing and Implementing Operation Ceasefire

David M. Kennedy

Anthony A. Braga

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Measuring the Impact of Operation Ceasefire

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September 2001

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The Boston Strategy To Prevent Youth Violence

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Rather than our usual framework which is let's fix the system and then we'll fix the problem, [the Boston Police Department and its partners] took the problem on while the institutional change went forward
-- David Kennedy

academia



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▶ The Commissioner's Office listened politely to us and said, right, please, go work with the gang unit, which we did. And which turned out to be a simply extraordinary opportunity because

what we found was to my mind, and I've seen a lot of cities working on these problems both before and since, remains a kind of unparalleled constellation of front-line folks that had been gathered around the gang unit. Not only the police officers, but folks that front-line police officers who worked out of the gang unit had built both personal and working relationships with. And at that point in Boston you had a lot of what Boston has now become famous for -- these very closed, continuous, focused working partnerships between police and probation and youth corrections and the Streetworkers and Black ministry and I could go on. This is a very long list that was already working together and doing a number of extremely creative things to both contain and prevent at least the worst kind of street violence in the city.

▶ So we had been approaching this as a gun problem. We had been approaching it as a fear problem and that turned out to be right, too. A lot of misbehavior was driven by quite rational fears on the kids' part about their own vulnerability. But we had, as everybody else had, been thinking about poverty and historical oppression and cultures of violence and media influence and all sorts of things, none of which I would even now discount. But we also heard from these practitioners something that we had never heard before, which was that there were not very many kids who were truly involved in this dynamic, not very many kids who were truly at risk. That those who were at risk tended to be chronic offenders and gang-involved in the way that we mean in Boston--it's our kind of looseknit, pretty inchoate street crew phenomenon. And that mostly what was happening was that these chronically ascending gang-involved kids were hurting one another.

▶ We looked at the criminal histories of five years of youth victims and offenders and found very high rates of prior arrests and court involvement. We looked at where gangs identified turf. We built gang maps and network maps of gang relationships based on the professional knowledge of practitioners. This was not available from old documents and paper records, but when you put these very skilled, experienced front-line folks around a table and a flip chart and got systematic about what they knew, they knew all this. And we ended up digitizing these maps and playing all kinds of fancy games with them, but it was all built on what they knew and the work they had done.

▶ Every way we looked at this question, you got pretty much the same answer. About 1,300 kids involved. That's less than 1% of the city's population. Sixty some gangs, large numbers of identifiable hostile connections between these gangs which when you go back over the 1990s end up generating 60-70-80% of the youth homicide in the city.

▶ There was one particular operation and then some other similar ones that were spearheaded by the gang unit, but with the participation of Probation and the Streetworkers and DYS and a number of other parties. The group had stopped very entrenched gang violence by going into this particular street and neighborhood in Dorchester and saying quite plainly to the kids that they knew were involved in this outbreak of gun violence, that until this violence stops, there would be comprehensive attention in every way that the authorities and the prevention specialists could bring to bear. That drug markets would be disrupted. Police warrants would be served. Probation would be strictly enforced. DYS would take its kids off the street. It's a long, long, long list of steps that the authorities had because they're dealing with chronic offenders. If they weren't chronic offenders, you couldn't do this, but they are, and so with the right kind of focus, you can essentially impose dozens of kinds of penalties because of the violence. And what was distinctive about this approach was first that the Police and Probation and Streetworkers said explicitly to the gang kids, 'We're here because of the violence and if the violence stops, we'll go put our attentions elsewhere.' And while the violence wasn't stopping, everybody got together on the authority's side and looked very carefully at this group and figured out essentially how to reach out and touch them. Probation did what they could. The Police did what they could. DYS did what they could. INS did what they could. This big partnership as we came to see later on, pulled all the levers they could and as we came to understand that approach, the conversation in the group turned to whether the city could do this systematically and could let the gangs know that from now on, from some date forward, this would be the response to gang violence rather than it being a kind of unusual and episodic practice as it had been in the past.

▶ The way I sometimes think about this is that one of the lessons of community policing, of problem-solving policing is to simply take on and deal with the toughest issues at the same time that you're trying to make fundamental institutional change. So, the Boston Police Department really now has singled itself out as one of the country's best police departments and it will continue to develop for years to come. Probation in Massachusetts is reinventing itself. The Streetworkers are evolving, but rather than our usual kind of framework on this which is, "Let's fix the system and then we'll fix the problem", they took the problem on while the institutional change went forward. They didn't wait for that transformative process and I wonder whether it might be possible in the social service and prevention side to create a similar kind of focused group of front-line folks to identify the four, five things most necessary to sustain the gains that have been won, primarily on the Law Enforcement Criminal Justice side so far and make sure that those things happen even while the difficult job of kind of reinventing government goes on and I think that's an opportunity that's going to take some leadership and some sponsorship, but might, in fact, really pay substantial dividends.

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