

Police Strategies Against Gun Crime: A Review



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Opinion

To maintain public safety and reduce gun violence, a strong need exists for understanding police strategies, practices, and related issues in addressing gun crimes. This article includes a review of articles on police strategies targeting gun crimes including both innovative programs and routine activities that have been used in the U.S. and is aimed at developing a general understanding on how police handle gun crimes, how effective they are, and what need to be done to improve their effectiveness. A key-word search was conducted to locate related publications in Criminal Justice Abstract and other online sources resulting in ninety-nine related articles. Upon closer examination, most of these publications do not address police anti-gun strategies and only twenty-six were relevant and selected for review. The review covers the theoretical frameworks, evaluation methods, police strategies, and results of implementing the strategies.

Theories behind various police strategies targeting gun crimes fall generally under problem-oriented policing, community-oriented policing, and situational crime prevention perspective. Problem-oriented policing, which is often combined with community policing, is based on the idea that finding and addressing the root causes of a certain crime problem is the key to solving it. Problem-oriented policing as a theory to reduce gun violence can be applied to places, persons, and risks. Situational prevention is applicable to policing gun crimes because it involves the specification of “the situational conditions that permit or facilitate the commission of the crimes in question” and that the immediate environment and organizational activities could influence crimes [1].

Evaluation methods used to study police gun-crime strategies include time-series design, quasi-experiment, case-file analysis, survey, and descriptive analysis. Quasi-experiments rest on the assumptions that the comparison group is in fact comparable and the most critical difference between the targeted and control areas is the police intervention. Case-file analysis involves the creation of a gun case database using gun case files and analysis of the database to understand the effects of related police activities. Most studies of police strategies are descriptive in nature and many police

programs against gun crime have not been formally evaluated [2].

About two dozen evaluations of police anti-gun strategies are available for review. Program titles include Operation Ceasefire, Project Exile, Project Safe Neighborhoods, Project Felon, Project Triggerlock, and so forth. Most strategies are based on the problem-oriented policing concept or its variations, with community-oriented policing elements (Braga, et al, [3]; Kennedy, et al. [4]; McGarrell, et al. [5]; O’Shea, [6]; Payne, et al. [7]; Sherman, et al. [8]; and Tita, et al. [9]), and very few on the situational prevention perspective or routine activity concept (Drawve, et al, [10]; Jiao, [11]). Problem-oriented policing strategies include place-oriented strategies, directed/targeted patrol, hot-spot policing, gun suppression, and gang- or offender-based suppression. Police strategies designed to address gun violence have been implemented in various metropolitan areas including Kansas, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, New York, St. Louis, Boston, Minneapolis, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Richmond, Buffalo, Oakland, Little Rock, and Eastern City. While most of them used problem-oriented policing strategies, two were examined with situational and routine activity perspectives.

Most of the studies reviewed suggest that focused police efforts have a significant effect on gun crime. Problem-oriented policing, community policing, and situational and routine activity strategies all seem to suggest that certain police efforts focused on gun violence have an effect on gun crime, whether they are place-oriented, target-oriented, offender-focused, behavior-focused, or based on environmental and operational variables. Most evaluations were able to link key components of police interventions to subsequent gun crime or individual behaviors subjected to the interventions. Previous reviews of gun studies (Sherman, [12]; National Research Council [2]) and national survey (Koper et al. [13]) also show that directed/targeted strategies against gun crimes work [13].

Further and more systematic research on police strategies, however, is warranted to understand how these efforts really work in reducing gun violence [12]. There is a need for more in-depth research on gun-related enforcement and prevention

practices, their effectiveness, and the organizational and environmental factors that facilitate or hinder them. Many complex factors affect the problem of gun violence and because data used for most studies were not derived from a true experimental design, it is often difficult to specify the exact role a police strategy played in the reduction of gun crime.

While police can learn from previous studies about effectiveness of police strategies, types of gun crimes, types of guns, and gun trace, they should also understand the contexts and police operations related to gun incidents. The association between public areas and substantive gun crimes indicates that police should target public areas prone for gun crime not only with effective strategies but also with situational and routine activities. They need to address also public perception of certain areas and create a sense of security [11].

The amount of research and knowledge on police effectiveness in handling gun crime remains limited. Although some police strategies and quasi-experiments reviewed seem to be effective in reducing gun violence, they were implemented as new interventions, subject to funding availability, and their effects may be transient and cannot always be explained by police interventions alone as many confounding factors remain elusive. Available studies also rarely address the immediate environment of gun incidents and routine police activities related to gun crimes. The situational crime prevention perspective focused on environmental factors and routine activities rather than new police tactics seems underutilized in understanding the police role in reducing gun violence. The dynamics of gun incidents and their investigations as influenced by the immediate environment and daily police activities need to be studied further.

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