

Project Safe Neighborhoods in Chicago

R E V I E W O F R E S E A R C H

May 2009

The Re-Entry of Violent Offenders in Chicago: Summary of the Project Safe Neighborhoods' Offender Notification Forums

*A Summary of Research by Tracey Meares (Yale) and
Andrew V. Papachristos (University of Massachusetts, Amherst)*

Since 2002, a Department of Justice funded program called Project Safe Neighborhoods (“PSN”) has been implemented in Chicago with the specific charge of reducing the city’s high level of homicide and gun violence. Chicago’s PSN began in May 2002 under the direction of the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, Patrick Fitzgerald. The U.S. Attorney’s office brought local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies together with community-based organizations and researchers from the University of Chicago with the specific purpose of analyzing Chicago’s gun violence problem and devising context-specific gun violence reduction strategies. Early in the program’s inception, the PSN taskforce not only recognized that re-entering offenders face considerable barriers to successful re-entry, but also that this population faces an extremely high risk of committing and being victimized by violent crime. In an attempt to address some of the issues returning offenders confront, the PSN taskforce devised a creative re-entry program called Offender Notification Forums (“Forums”).

CHICAGO’S PRISONER RE-ENTRY PROBLEM

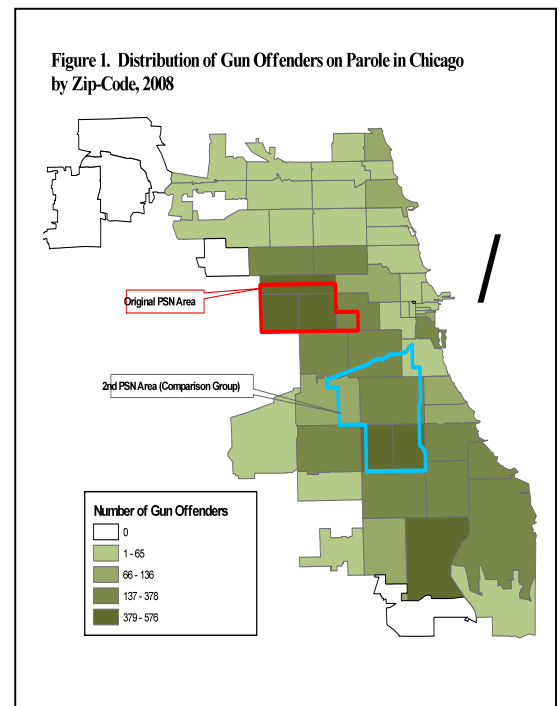
More than 39,000 adults are released from prisons in Illinois each year. Over half of these return to Chicago. The majority of returning offenders reside in a small number of economically and socially disadvantaged neighborhoods lacking the basic social services needed for successful re-entry. As FIGURE 1 demonstrates, most former prisoners return to communities on Chicago’s West and South Sides. The population of these communities is predominantly African-American where poverty, unemployment, and crime rates are more than triple those of other areas in the city. In short, the communities in Chicago absorbing the greatest number of returning inmates lack the social and economic capital to best deal with prisoner re-entry. Indeed, 52 percent of these re-entering offenders will return to prison within three years of their release.

The communities selected for the PSN program receive the highest number of returning inmates each year (FIGURE 1). And, while the PSN taskforce developed a host of enforcement, prosecutorial, prevention, and intervention initiatives in this area, the team paid special attention to re-entering offenders.

THE THEORY BEHIND THE FORUMS: RE-ENTRY AND LEGITIMACY

The PSN taskforce’s law enforcement strategies are, for the most part, traditional in nature in that they emphasize direct policing and prosecution of gun-related offenses. However, the taskforce also wanted to develop strategies that leveraged a central concept – that the key to changing patterns of gun crime lies in altering the normative beliefs of gun users themselves. Prior research, including research in Chicago, suggested that individuals are most likely to comply with the law (a) when they believe in the substance of the law, (b) when they have positive interactions with law enforcement agents, and (c) when they perceive the procedures used in enforcing the law to be fair and just.

Keeping these principles in mind and considering other successful programs implemented in Boston, the PSN taskforce crafted its most innovative strategy, *Offender Notification Forums* (“Forums”). The basic idea of these Forums is two-fold: (1) to provide attendees with information regarding law enforcement consequences and available service options relevant to crime desistance, and (2) alter perceptions of law enforcement.



Offenders in the target neighborhood with a history of gun violence and gang participation who were recently assigned to parole or probation are requested to attend a Forum hosted by the PSN taskforce. The Forums are hour-long, round-table style meetings in which approximately 20 offenders sit with officials from federal, state and local law enforcement, community representatives, and various service providers. Informal conversations with attendees after the meeting concludes often last an additional hour and lead to more intimate follow-up and service provision. The meetings take place in a location of civic importance (such as a local park, library, or school) and are designed to be egalitarian in nature, meaning that offenders sit at the same table as all other Forum participants rather than as passive audience members.

The content of the Forum is designed to stress to offenders the *consequences* should they choose to pick up a gun, as well as, the *choices* they have to make to ensure that they do not re-offend. The meeting is divided into three different segments described below.

CIVIC IMPORTANCE AND PROCEDURAL JUSTICE: THE CONTEXT AND SETTING

The Forums are held in locations of “civic importance,” such as a school, local park, church, or community center to avoid the perception of attendees that the process is a pure law enforcement approach. Additionally, the location is meant to emphasize that attendees are participating members of the community. The PSN taskforce believes that the setting of the Forum is as critical as the content to help make salient to re-entering offenders that they are individually important and have power to change their lives.

The physical setting of the Forums is another important feature. It is egalitarian in nature. In contrast to a more traditional didactic or hierarchical structure in which speakers talk with authority from a podium, the Forums are conducted as a “round-table” style meeting in which the speakers of the meeting are (literally) sitting down at the table with the attendees. Everyone is on equal footing and able to look one another directly in the eyes when speaking. In this way direct mutual accountability is generated

THE MESSAGE AND ITS DELIVERY

The tone of the message in each section is best described as straightforward. These are not “scared straight” sessions, nor are they preachy. They are designed to convey to the returning offenders in as matter-of-fact a way as possible the seriousness of continuing to participate in violence in the neighborhoods in which they live, the consequences of failing to turn away from violence, and the available paths to turn their lives around. The take home point is simple: “You have agency. It is up to **you** to make a decision to turn your life around.”

The Law Enforcement Message. First, law enforcement agencies openly discuss the targeted PSN enforcement efforts, giving examples of cases that have occurred *within* the attendees’ neighborhoods. Forum attendees often are familiar with the defendants. The point of the first segment is to explain in very specific terms the consequences of gun offending for both the individual and his neighborhood.

District Commander. The district commander speaks first. She has the most intimate knowledge of the pressing problems of each neighborhood. It is her job to highlight these issues and to explain her role in working with community members in order to keep the neighborhood safe. Typically the commander will: emphasize the fact that violence affects everyone – including (and especially) the returning prisoners; the senseless nature of intra-racial violence; and the fact the community is fed-up with high levels of violence. One way commanders “bring the point home” to attendees is to highlight particular cases in which former felons are prosecuted through the multi-agency process

A POLICE COMMANDER’S MESSAGE

“You’re only going to be targeted if you pick up a gun, so you have a choice, right? So, if you get angry, pick up a shoe and beat someone with it because you probably won’t kill them and you won’t have to worry about us . . . It’s when you pick up a gun that you have a problem.”

USA’s Office. A representative from the U.S. Attorney’s Office, typically an Assistant United State’s Attorney explains that federal and state prosecutors jointly review all gun cases for potential federal prosecution where judges, juries, sentences and location of incarceration is very different from the county system. The federal message emphasizes the “steamroller” nature of the process – that is, it is relentless and ongoing. The process will happen. The question is whether the former prisoner will choose to get out of the way.

State’s Attorney’s Office. The local prosecutor’s message is a corollary to the federal message in that the point is to make clear that prosecution of gun offenses will take place whether at the federal or state level. The state prosecutor again emphasizes that the former prisoner has a choice to make.

A STATE’S ATTORNEY’S MESSAGE

“We don’t want to see you again, because, if we do, it’ll either be on a piece of paper as someone who picked up a gun, or as a victim. Go out and be producers. Don’t destroy the community anymore.”

ATF. Finally, an agent from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and Explosives explains their role in pursuing gun offenses. ATF agents participate in the local-federal gun teams, but they also make affirmative gun cases through investigation. The unique message that the ATF agents offer is that they are the “gun police,” and it is their job to track the guns down – any and everyone who has touched the gun. This is a critical message because it makes clear to the participants the lack of jurisdictional boundaries of federal agents in contrast to the county agents with which they are familiar.

The Ex-Offender Message. In the second segment of the Forum there is a presentation by an ex-offender who has successfully stayed away from a life of offending for several years. The ex-offender relates to attendees how he has been able to stay away from a life of crime through personal poignant examples. This speaker’s message stresses the seriousness of the current levels of violence in the community; the problems of intra-racial violence; the truth about gang life (including its meager financial rewards to most of its gang members); the troubles offenders face when looking for work; and the seriousness of the PSN enforcement efforts. This section is the

most motivational and emotional of the three. This is the speaker who can make a particular empathetic connection to the attendees.

The Service Provider Message. The final segment of the Forum stresses the choices offenders can make in order to avoid re-offending. This entails a series of conversations with service providers, community agencies, and employers from the offenders' own neighborhoods. Programs include substance abuse assistance, temporary shelter, job training, mentorship and union training, education and GED courses, and behavior counseling. Often several local employers attend and actually instruct attendees on the necessary steps to gain employment with their respective firms. One critical aspect of the service provider message is that it does not repeat the law enforcement message. These representatives emphasize the seriousness and harm of poor choices that the attendees could make, but their goal and tone is not to condemn. Rather, their point is simply to say that, "We are here to help you should you choose to make a good choice rather than a poor one. It is up to you."

AN EX-OFFENDER'S MESSAGE

" There's a saying, 'Change is choice, but accountability is a guarantee.' They [pointing to LE] are sitting here and telling you they [are] coming after you. Gonna hold you accountable. Now, I don't mean no disrespect, but if you ain't listening, you got to be a fool . . . I changed. It was a choice, a real hard one. But I did it . . . Once you change your life around, you'll have a whole new respect for others and yourself"

FURTHER READING

The full evaluation results can be found in the following papers:

- Papachristos, Andrew V. , Tracey Meares, and Jeffrey Fagan (2007). "Attention Felons: Evaluating Project Safe Neighborhoods in Chicago," *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies*.
- Meares, Tracey and Andrew V. Papachristos (2008). "Policing Gun Crime without Guns." Available at the Social Science Research Network: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1326932>
- Papachristos, Andrew V., Tracey Meares, and Jeffrey Fagan. (2009). "Why Do Criminals Obey the Law? The Influence of the Law and Social Networks on Active Gun Offenders." Available at the Social Science Research Network: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1326631>
- Fagan, Jeffrey, Andrew V. Papachristos, Danielle Wallace, and Tracey Meares. (2008). "Desistance and Legitimacy: Effect Heterogeneity in a Field Experiment with High-Risk Offenders." Available at Columbia Law School: http://www2.law.columbia.edu/fagan/papers/Desistance_and_Legitimacy_PSN_Recidivism_2.ppt

This project was supported by Grant # 2006-GP-CX-0017 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance through the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime. Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the author and do not represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice, or the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority