

Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives

# Case Study: Boston

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Boston experienced an epidemic of youth homicides largely stemming from a rise in violent gang activity and the widespread use of crack cocaine. Juvenile handgun homicides more than tripled—from 22 victims in 1987 to 73 victims in 1990. When youth homicide rates remained high, averaging 44 homicides per year between 1991 and 1995, Boston authorities knew they had to act.

Operation Ceasefire came into being in 1995 to address this issue, with the support of a grant from the National Institute of Justice. A working group of community participants—including the police force, educators and front-line practitioners—led the effort to develop a viable solution for this gun-related slaughter among its urban youth.

The project applied a radically different approach to gun violence, focusing on direct deterrence rather than traditional methods. The working group began by identifying gangs with the highest risk of gun-related violence. Then, it systematically contacted their members. In face-to-face confrontations, Operation Ceasefire communicated an unequivocal warning: If violence continued to occur, authorities would unleash an immediate and certain response. Operation Ceasefire's novel group accountability model, where attention is paid to everyone involved in the crime not just the killer, served as powerful deterrent.

The approach made powerful, strategic use of existing authorities—such as police, parole officers and the like—to prosecute violent actions aggressively and to create a strong deterrent. Family members, community leaders and service providers also engaged directly with gang members to communicate a moral message against violence and to offer help to those willing to accept it.

### Fast Facts:

- **Community:** Boston, MA
- **Problem:** High and rising youth homicide rates
- **Results:** 66% reduction in youth homicide rates between 1995 and 1997
- **Differentiating Feature:** Operation Ceasefire focused on 1,300 gang related chronic offenders after in-depth research showed that 60% of youth homicides were driven by this 1% of all youth.
- **Leaders/Lead Organization:** Operation Ceasefire
- **Philanthropic Support:** National Institute of Justice

Living up to its name, Operation Ceasefire was associated with significant reductions in youth homicides and gun assaults. Youth homicides dropped to 15 in 1997, about one-third of the average between 1991 and 1995. Shots-fired calls to police fell 32 percent, reflecting a 25 percent decrease in gun assaults. Due to its achievements, the Operation Ceasefire model was institutionalized as the Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS) and since 2000 has been replicated in many other communities.

Yet, Operation Ceasefire's initial successes were not unalloyed. In its early phase, one consequence of this success was that multiple sides tried to claim credit for the achievement. Those touting themselves included the police, probation officers, social workers and the Ten Point Coalition. Many groups stood to gain by claiming responsibility for "The Boston Miracle" even though it was really the sum of their efforts that made the difference.

All of these divisions created a toll. Operation Ceasefire discontinued operations in 2000 due to loss of key leadership, shortages of manpower and political wrangling. As a result, gang-related homicides started to increase again as conflicts among gangs grew unchecked. With the appointment of a new commissioner of the Boston Police Department in 2006, however, the effort was reinvigorated. The city has since experienced a decline in youth homicides. The experience in Boston highlights the need for a long-term investment to sustain progress.

### **Three key things made Operation Ceasefire successful in reducing youth homicide rates:**

#### **The power of diverse perspectives:** *cross-sector engagement*

Operation Ceasefire expertly utilized a combination of enforcement officials, probation officers, frontline practitioners, black clergy and researchers to create a new working group. This group tapped into the strength of each member through biweekly meetings to discuss the activities within their agencies and the conditions they observed on the street. Over time, the experience sharing among working group members helped to evolve the direction and priorities of the project.

A key differentiator of this collaborative was the inclusion of both external researchers and practitioners on the streets. Researchers provided a vital outside perspective, bringing new practices to the group. The researchers also were able to communicate issues to agency leaders who had been unavailable to the working group members. Meantime, the use of the frontline practitioners provided a channel for acquiring qualitative research directly from the streets, validating the feasibility of programs and communicating directly to gang members.

**Direction-setting use of data:** *use of data to set the agenda and improve over time*  
Boston's Operation Ceasefire undertook a rigorous "problem-oriented" approach to attack the issue of gun-related youth violence in that city. This strategy required extensive research and analysis to shape both the definition of the problem and resulting actions. For example, the working team originally classified the problem in Boston as one of "juvenile gun violence." But after in-depth research on gang-related violence in Boston, the working group discovered that the majority of the youth violence offenders came from a small community of 1,300 chronic offenders involved in Boston-area gangs. Only 1 percent of Boston youth actually participated in youth gangs. Yet, these youth generated at least 60 percent of youth homicide in the city. This data helped refine the group's broad focus on "juvenile gun violence" to a more actionable focus on "chronic gang offenders."

**Codifying success for replication:** *deliberate alignment toward what works*  
Operation Ceasefire's best practices have been be utilized by other cities through the Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS). Replication sites have experienced highly significant, near-term reductions in crime using existing resources in a strategic and focused way. Most recently, a target group comprising 11 cities is slated to be part of the National Network "Leadership Group" to codify GVRS best practices and create a new national standard for addressing violent and drug-related crime. These cities must make a five-year commitment and in return receive technical assistance. Looking back, several cities helped lay the foundation for the GVRS model and have had formal evaluations including:

- **Chicago, Illinois (2001-Present):** an adaptation of the GVRS model focused on individual parolees in several violent neighborhoods with gun or violent crime convictions
  - **Results:** a 37 percent decrease in community homicide rate; 30 percent decrease in recidivism among treatment group parolees
- **Indianapolis, Indiana (2000-2002):** citywide group violence reduction strategy
  - **Results:** a 34 percent reduction in total homicide; 70 percent reduction in black male homicides
- **Lowell, Massachusetts (2002):** citywide group violence-reduction strategy
  - **Results:** a 44 percent reduction in fatal and non-fatal gun assaults
- **Stockton, California (2002):** citywide group violence-reduction strategy
  - **Results:** a 42 percent decrease in gun homicide
- **Cincinnati, Ohio (2006-Present):** citywide group violence-reduction strategy
  - **Results:** a four-year, sustained 41 percent decrease in gang-related homicide; 22 percent decrease in non-fatal shootings

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## SOURCES

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