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Creating an Effective Foundation to Prevent Youth Violence: Lessons Learned from Boston in the 1990s

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Over the course of the 1990's, Boston received national attention for Operation Ceasefire and other innovative efforts to prevent youth violence. In the four years after Operation Ceasefire was launched in 1996, youth homicides in the city dropped by almost two-thirds. As a result, the U.S. Department of Justice embraced Operation Ceasefire's "pulling levers" strategy as an effective approach to crime prevention and, with funding from federally sponsored violence prevention programs, many American cities developed programs like Operation Ceasefire.

Unfortunately, serious youth violence has returned to Boston streets. While there were only 15 youth homicides in Boston in 2000, there were 36 in 2004 (See Figure). Moreover, other cities have had limited success with the "pulling levers" strategy. In Baltimore and Minneapolis, two well-known efforts to replicate the Boston experience, violence prevention initiatives rapidly unraveled and were soon abandoned.

As Boston comes to grips with a new cycle of youth violence, it is important to clarify its past experience with the now defunct Operation Ceasefire initiative. In particular, Operation Ceasefire simply could not have been successful without two elements. First, it was essential to have established a "network of capacity" consisting of dense and productive relationships that could work together to address the problem of violent youth crime. Second, a new mechanism of police accountability was needed to overcome community distrust of the Boston Police Department engendered by a long history of perceived racism.

The Boston Gun Project and Operation Ceasefire

Like many American cities during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Boston suffered an epidemic of youth violence that had its roots in the rapid spread of street-level crack-cocaine markets. In 1995, as part of its ongoing efforts to address the problem, the police department launched the Boston Gun Project, a collaborative effort, which aimed to analyze the underlying causes of the problem and then to use that analysis to identify the most promising strategies for preventing and controlling serious youth violence. The analysis and planning phase began in early 1995 and the strategy, named Operation Ceasefire, was implemented in mid-1996.

At the beginning of this effort, the Boston Gun Project working group, which consisted of law enforcement personnel, youth workers, and researchers, analyzed the nature of Boston's youth

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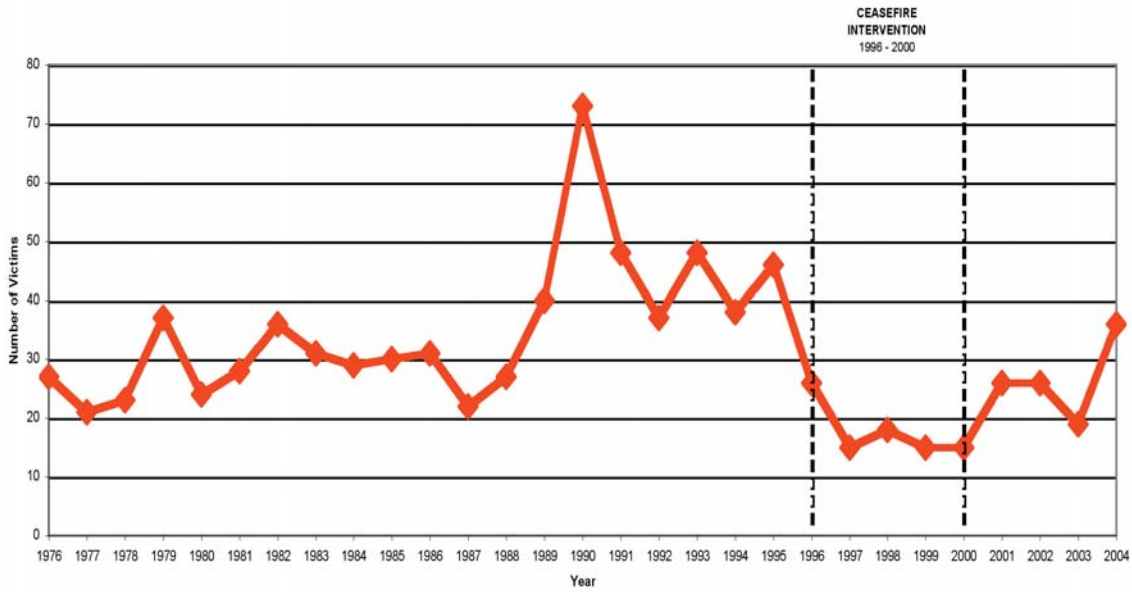
violence. They concluded it was largely the result of patterned, largely vendetta-like hostility among a small population of highly active criminal offenders—particularly those involved in about 60 loose, informal, mostly neighborhood-based gangs.

Based on the findings, the working group crafted Operation Ceasefire, which tightly focused on disrupting ongoing conflicts among youth gangs. On a biweekly basis, the Boston Police Department's Youth Violence Strike Force, an elite unit of about 40 officers and detectives, convened an interagency working group, comprised of law enforcement personnel, youth workers, and members of Boston's Ten Point Coalition of activist black clergy. The group developed a "pulling levers" strategy, which aimed to deter gang violence by reaching out directly to gangs, explicitly saying that violence would no longer be tolerated, and backing up that message by "pulling every lever" legally available when violence occurred. These "levers" included disrupting street-level drug markets, serving warrants, mounting federal prosecutions, and changing the conditions of community supervision for targeted probationers and parolees. Simultaneously, youth workers, probation and parole officers, and clergy offered gang members services and other kinds of help. If gang members wanted to step away from a violent lifestyle, the Operation Ceasefire working group focused on providing them with the services and opportunities necessary to make the transition.

The working group delivered their anti-violence message in formal meetings with gang members; through individual police and probation contacts with gang members; through meetings with inmates of secure juvenile facilities in the city; and through gang outreach workers. The deterrence message was not a deal with gang members to stop violence. Rather, it was a promise to gang members that violent behavior would evoke an immediate and intense response.

After Operation Ceasefire started in mid-1996, youth homicides in Boston dropped dramatically and did not increase for about five years. (See Figure) The Operation Ceasefire program, as designed, was in place until 2000. The Boston Police Department subsequently experimented with a broader approach to violence prevention by expanding certain Operation Ceasefire tactics to a range of problems such as serious repeat violent gun offenders and the re-entry of incar-

Figure 1: Youth Homicide in Boston 1976 - 2004



cerated violent offenders back into high-risk Boston neighborhoods. These new approaches, known as the Boston Strategy II, seemed to diffuse the ability of Boston to respond to ongoing conflicts among gangs. Youth homicide, most of which is gang related, has steadily increased since 2000. In response, the Boston Police Department recently implemented a new violence prevention campaign, known as the Street Violence Suppression Project, which borrows heavily from Operation Ceasefire's tight focus on disrupting cycles of violent gang retribution.

Operation Ceasefire's Impact on Violence

In a study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), a team of scholars (including one of us) used a non-randomized control group design to analyze trends in serious urban violence between 1991 and 1998. The study found that Operation Ceasefire was associated with a 63 percent decrease in monthly number of Boston youth homicides, a 32 percent decrease in monthly number of shots-fired calls, a 25 percent decrease in monthly number of gun assaults, and, in one high-risk police district given special attention in the evaluation, a 44 percent decrease in monthly number of youth gun assault incidents.[1] It also suggested that the significant youth homicide reduction associated with Operation Ceasefire was distinct when compared to youth homicide trends in most major U.S. and New England cities.

Other researchers, however, have observed that since violence decreased in most major U.S. cities in the late 1990s, homicides in Boston might have decreased without Operation Ceasefire. Jeffrey Fagan's review of gun homicide in Boston and in other Massachusetts cities, for example, suggests a general downward trend in gun violence that existed before Operation Ceasefire was implemented.[2] Steven Levitt, who analyzed homicide trends over the course of the 1990s, concluded that the impact of innovative policing strategies—such as Operation Ceasefire in Boston and New York City's "broken windows" approach and Compstat program—had a limited impact on homicides. Rather, he argued, other factors, such as increases in the number of police, the rising prison population, the waning crack-cocaine epidemic, and the legalization of abortion, can account for nearly all of the national decline in homicide, violent crime, and property crime in the 1990s.[3]

"After Operation Ceasefire started in mid-1996, youth homicides in Boston dropped dramatically and did not increase for about five years."

The National Academies' Panel on Improving Information and Data on Firearms, however, concluded that DOJ's evaluation of Operation Ceasefire made a compelling case that Operation Ceasefire was associated with the subsequent decline in youth homicide in Boston. The panel suggested that many complex factors affect youth homicide trends, and it was difficult to specify the exact relationship between Operation Ceasefire and changes in Boston's homicide rate. While the DOJ-sponsored evaluation statistically controlled for existing violence trends and certain rival causal factors such as changes in the youth population, drug markets, and employment in Boston, the National Academies' Panel noted that complex interaction effects among factors not measured by the DOJ evaluation could account for some meaningful portion of the decrease in Boston's homicide rate. As a result, the panel said it could not conclusively determine that Operation Ceasefire was the sole factor causing the decline in homicides.[4]

The Larger Boston Story I: Development of a "Network of Capacity"

Like the National Academies Panel, we believe that while it is difficult to measure its exact contribution, Operation Ceasefire was responsible for a meaningful proportion of the decline in

youth homicides in Boston in the late 1990s. We also believe that most accounts of Operation Ceasefire miss the larger story.

Before the Boston Gun Project began work on what ultimately became Operation Ceasefire, it had already created what Mark Moore has called the "network of capacity" necessary to legitimize, fund, equip, and carry out complex strategies for controlling and preventing youth violence.[5] Such networks are unusual because criminal justice agencies generally work largely independent of each other, often at cross-purposes, often without coordination, and often in an atmosphere of mutual distrust and dislike.

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Until the height of the youth violence epidemic, this was certainly true in Boston. It was painfully apparent that no one agency could mount a meaningful response to the gang violence that was spiraling out of control. In the early 1990s, the crisis forced Boston criminal justice agencies to work together and develop new approaches to deal with the violence problem. Officers and detectives with the police department's Youth Violence Strike Force and line-level workers from other criminal justice agencies collaborated on a variety of innovative programs. These included: "Operation Nightlight"—a police-probation partnership to ensure at-risk youth were abiding by the conditions of their release into the community; "Safe Neighborhoods Initiatives"—a community prosecution program that was rooted in a partnership between the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office, the police department, and community members in hot-spot neighborhoods; and a partnership between the police department, the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the U.S. Attorney's Office to identify and apprehend the illegal gun traffickers who were arming the violent gangs.

The Youth Violence Strike Force also formed working relationships with social service and opportunity provision agencies, which also rarely work together with criminal justice agencies. The strike force was the lead agency for certain initiatives, such as the "Summer of Opportunity" program, which provided at-risk youth with job training and leadership skills that could be transferred to workplace, school, or home settings. More often, however, the police supported the activities of youth social service providers from community-based organizations such as the Boston Community Centers' street-worker program and the Dorchester Youth Collaborative. Strike force officers and detectives would encourage at-risk youth to take advantage of these resources and also consider the input of youth workers in determining whether certain gang-involved youth would be better served by prevention and intervention actions rather than law enforcement actions.

As a result, when the police department launched the Boston Gun Project, the leaders of its Youth Violence Strike Force had already developed a potentially powerful network of working relationships and partnerships that spanned the boundaries that divide criminal justice agencies from one another, criminal justice agencies from human service agencies, and criminal justice agencies from the community. This network was well positioned to launch an effective response to youth violence because criminal justice agencies, community groups, and social service agencies coordinated and combined their efforts in ways that could magnify their separate effects.

The Gun Project and Operation Ceasefire capitalized on these existing relationships by fo-

cusing the network on the problem of youth violence and giving the group a wide range of "levers" that it could "pull" in its efforts address that problem. Partnerships with other criminal justice agencies, for example, offered a varied menu of enforcement options that could be tailored to particular gangs. By including social service agencies and other community groups, Operation Ceasefire also provided much-needed "carrots" to balance the law enforcement "sticks." The linkages with social service agencies and other non-profit entities made it easier to convince community leaders to support Operation Ceasefire; and the legitimacy that these leaders conferred on Operation Ceasefire greatly facilitated its success.

The Larger Boston Story II: Accountability and Police-Community Relations

Operation Ceasefire also was profoundly influenced by an ongoing and significant change in the relationship between the Boston Police and Boston's minority communities. When the violence epidemic started in the late 1980s, the Boston Police Department relied upon highly aggressive and reportedly indiscriminate policing tactics to deal with street gang violence, such as stopping and frisking all black males in high-crime areas. This approach produced a series of well-publicized scandals. Perhaps the most important was the 1989 murder of Carol Stuart, a pregnant white woman on her way home to the suburbs from Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. Initially, Charles Stuart, the victim's husband—who was the actual murderer—led Boston Police investigators to believe that the murderer was a young black man. The police responded by blanketing the housing projects near the hospital. Abusive police conduct was reportedly widespread, and coerced statements led to the highly publicized arrest of a young black male as the leading suspect in the case. Other information eventually led investigators to Charles Stuart, who committed suicide when his story began to unravel.

The department's actions in the Carol Stuart case and other problems finally led to the appointment of an independent commission charged with reviewing the Boston Police Department. The commission's report, which was released in 1992, contended the department was mismanaged and called for extensive changes, including replacing the department's top personnel. Over the next few years, the Boston Police Department changed dramatically. In mid 1992, the commissioner resigned and was replaced by someone committed to reform. When that person left, the city's new mayor appointed another reformer to the commissioner's post. Both reform-minded commissioners replaced the existing command staff with officers who were known to be innovative and hardworking. The department invested in technology to better understand crime problems, implemented a neighborhood policing plan, and trained beat-level officers in the methods of community and problem-oriented policing. The police also moved from trying to disrupt ongoing gang conflicts to trying to prevent violence from taking place.

While such changes helped create an environment where the police could collaborate with the community, residents of Boston's poor minority neighborhoods remained wary of and dissatisfied with a police department that had a long history of abusive and unfair treatment. The Ten Point Coalition, a group of activist black minister who came together in 1992 to address the problem of gang violence in their communities, played a major role in changing this perception.

The ministers in the coalition, which was formed after gang members attacked mourners during a church funeral service, tried to prevent youth in their community from joining gangs, to convince gang members to cease violent activities, and to convey an anti-violence message to all youth in their communities. Initially, the ministers were highly and publicly critical of police efforts to prevent youth violence. As the ministers began to work the streets, however, they started to

form effective relationships with particular police officers, who were starting to carry out the department's emerging efforts to prevent violent youth crime. As a result, the ministers and the police officers began to develop a shared understanding that only a small number of youth in the neighborhoods were involved in violence; many of these gang-involved youth were better served by intervention and prevention strategies; and only a small number of these gang-involved youth needed to be removed from the streets through arrest and prosecution.

As trust grew, the Ten Point ministers helped the Boston Police respond to several potentially explosive events, including the beating of a black undercover officer by uniformed police officers and the accidental death of 75-year-old retired black minister who suffered a fatal heart attack after a botched drug raid. In these cases, the ministers demanded that the police department investigate incidents thoroughly and hold those involved accountable for their mistakes. When the department did so, the ministers publicly communicated their approval. This, in turn, prevented these situations from becoming more explosive and provided the police with the continued political support they needed in order to undertake policy innovations, such as Operation Ceasefire.

"While the Ten Point ministers were not involved in the design of Operation Ceasefire, they were influential as an informal 'litmus test' for how the community would view its components."

The Ten Point ministers also sheltered the police from broad public criticism when the police were engaged in activities the ministers deemed to be of interest to the community. Illustratively, in 1995, Paul McLaughlin, a local gang prosecutor who was white, was murdered on his way home from work. The initial description of the assailant ("young black male wearing a hooded sweatshirt and baggy pants") was vague enough to make many in the black community worry that there was going to be another "open season on young black males" similar to what had occurred during the Carol Stuart investigation. Fortunately, these initial fears were unfounded as the black ministers and the Boston Police supported each other in the ensuing investigation. The ministers publicly praised the police for showing restraint in their conduct and the police praised the ministers for their help.

While the Ten Point ministers were not involved in the design of Operation Ceasefire, they were influential as an informal "litmus test" for how the community would view its components. For example, while discussing plausible interventions, the working group was impressed with the results of the Kansas City Gun Experiment, which enforced laws against carrying concealed firearms via frisks during traffic stops and of pedestrians who appeared to carry concealed weapons in areas known as hot spots for gun-related violence. After some discussion, the working group decided not to replicate this effort in Boston because the police did not want to adopt an enforcement program that the Ten Point ministers might view as a return to the indiscriminate "stop and frisk" policies of the early 1990s.

When the working group was ready to implement Operation Ceasefire, the commander of the Youth Violence Strike Force asked key black ministers to support and assist the initiative. Without such support and involvement, the community and local media could have easily viewed Operation Ceasefire as simply another effort to arrest large numbers of young black men. The ministers recognized that Operation Ceasefire was carefully focused only on violent gang-involved youth and offered gang members who wanted to change access to social services and

other opportunities. After Operation Ceasefire was implemented, Ten Point Coalition ministers became regular members of the working group and worked with the police to identify dangerous gang-involved youth, to communicate the anti-violence deterrence message to all youth and, with the help of social service providers, to offer assistance to gang youth who wanted to move away from their violent lifestyles.

By including the ministers in the Ceasefire working group, the Boston Police developed a mechanism for transparency and accountability, which was very important to leaders of Boston's minority community. This, in turn, built trust and further solidified a functional working relationship between the community and the police department. By engaging in a process in which they were meaningfully and appropriately accountable to the community, the police department generated the political support, or "umbrella of legitimacy," that it needed to pursue more focused and perhaps more aggressive intervention than would otherwise have been possible.

Implications for Other Violence Prevention Programs

Operation Ceasefire became a nationally recognized model for reducing youth violence and many jurisdictions, such as Baltimore, Minneapolis, and San Francisco, started to experiment with the approach. Unfortunately, despite some initial promising results, many replications were never fully implemented or were eventually abandoned.[6]

We believe the problem is that these jurisdictions simply did not have an adequate network of capacity in place before adopting a Ceasefire-like approach to youth violence. Operation Ceasefire was a "relationship intensive" intervention based on trust and the ability of a diverse set of individuals to work together towards a common goal. Unfortunately, the description of Operation Ceasefire that generally circulates in criminal justice circles oversimplifies the Boston experience, which is a recipe for frustration and eventual failure.

Trust and accountability are essential in launching a meaningful collaborative response to complex youth violence problems. The need for such collaborations does not guarantee that they inevitably arise or, once developed, that they are sustained. As Eugene Bardach has noted, different agencies are reluctant to give up control over scarce resources that could compromise their traditional missions; and they face difficulty aligning individual work efforts into a functional enterprise, or developing a collective leadership among a group of individuals aligned with the needs of their individual organizations.[7]

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A central problem in creating and managing effective capacity-building collaborations is overcoming the corrosive problem of distrust. Like most cities, distrust characterized the relationship among criminal justice agencies and between criminal justice agencies and the inner-city community in Boston. Police and community members in Boston were able to overcome their historical distrust and form productive working relationships. Operation Ceasefire was built on these preexisting relationships. Of course, working groups can be forced together and, sometimes, can implement short-term programs that have promising initial results. However, if the initiative is not based on a shared understanding of the problem and cemented through functional partnerships, it will fall apart.

In many community and problem-oriented policing projects, community members serve as in-

formants who report to the police on unacceptable community conditions and the particulars of crime problems. They are rarely engaged as "partners" or "co-producers" of public safety. Police officers remain the "experts" on crime who are primarily responsible for developing and managing interventions to address crime problems. But police strategies can acquire true legitimacy within the inner city only if the community partner publicly supports police tactics when they are appropriate and criticizes them when they are not. By engaging the Ten Point ministers in their violence prevention efforts and creating a sense of joint ownership of the youth violence problem, the Boston Police Department created the political support necessary for both innovation and more focused and aggressive intervention. Without such support, the police cannot pursue an innovative enforcement strategy that targets truly dangerous youth at the heart of urban violence problems.

Endnotes

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