

# Perspectives on Violence Prevention

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## Ending Gang Homicide: Deterrence Can Work

By Stewart Wakeling

Not long ago in Boston, an unusual problem-solving partnership between law enforcement agencies and researchers from Harvard University produced a dramatic drop in serious youth violence. The researchers carefully studied local gang activity by mapping gang territory, tracing antagonisms and alliances between gangs, and identifying the worst repeat offenders, until they had a strong sense of what was happening on the street.<sup>1</sup> Boston's law enforcement used this information to construct a strategy — dubbed Ceasefire — that combined intensive enforcement activity, enhanced collaboration among law enforcement agencies, and direct communication with gangs and gang members at the highest risk of violence. The most widely reported result of the effort was a long-term drop of 60 percent in youth homicide.<sup>2</sup> At one point, Boston went two years without a juvenile homicide.<sup>3</sup>

The good news didn't stop with Boston. Here in California, Stockton, a mid-sized city in the Central Valley, adopted the Ceasefire approach in 1997 and used it to reduce gang-related youth homicide by more than 75 percent. Stockton's experience is all the more significant because it didn't have the luxury of a large grant or new funding stream to support a costly anti-violence initiative. The city used the financial resources and programs available to it to build a cohesive strategy based on Boston's approach.

## Why this publication?

We are pleased to welcome you to the first issue of **At the Local Level: Perspectives on Violence Prevention**. As the title suggests, it is our communities that determine and implement the policies and programs that directly reduce violence. Federal and state government, on the other hand, are best situated to provide coordination, funding, and technical assistance.

As the title also suggests, violence can and should be prevented, not just reacted to. Until recently, our nation has addressed violence primarily by arresting, prosecuting, and imprisoning those responsible. In the past 15 years, however, social scientists have demonstrated that many prevention programs are cost-effective. Moreover, those of us in government have come to understand that effective prevention efforts absolutely require collaboration among all interested community and government organizations.

We are launching this publication with the hope that it will advance California's effort to make violence prevention a mainstay of public policy and politics. As the public officials who represent California's law enforcement and public health communities—communities that have not been closely linked historically—we believe that the strategies of both communities are necessary to prevent violence. We expect that the articles published will reflect that wide range of approaches, helping us to look at this issue from a variety of perspectives.

There is no single remedy for violence. It is a complex problem that requires a thoughtful solution. Our challenge is to make prevention part of that solution.

Bill Lockyer  
Attorney General

Grantland Johnson  
Secretary  
Health and Human Services Agency

## Building a strategy in Stockton

A community of nearly 275,000 people in northern San Joaquin County, Stockton is a city in transition. The many new housing developments replacing its agricultural base are punctuated by pockets of some of the deepest poverty in the state. Like many other cities in the Central Valley, Stockton faces substantial social problems—and it does so with limited financial resources. The area's unemployment rate is often double that of the state and three to four times that of the nearby Bay Area, and poverty rates are much higher than those of the state overall.

In 1997, residents of Stockton felt the city was on the cusp of an epidemic of youth violence. They were worried the problem had spun out of control when several young women—all

bystanders—were killed in gang violence over the span of just a few months. The problem was terribly urgent, but it was also complicated. Stockton had more than 150 gangs that reflected California's cultural and ethnic diversity. Latino, African American, Caucasian, Hmong, Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese gangs were active throughout the city. Targeting a single neighborhood or gang with intensive enforcement efforts wasn't a realistic option for a police department responding to gang conflicts that seemed to be popping up all over town. What's more, these conflicts were often deadly. Gangs had easy access to guns; Stockton typically recovered twice the number of guns used in crimes that Boston did, though Boston had more than twice as many residents.

**Using existing resources to tackle an urgent problem.** Stockton couldn't wait for new resources to counter this growing violence. So it forged ahead with a modest, practical goal. It would organize existing financial resources and programs into a strategy that drew on what seemed to have worked in Boston. Then, as new resources became available, the city would build an increasingly comprehensive local strategy. The effort unfolded over several months from the fall of 1997 through the fall of 1998.

In September 1997, Stockton's police department began by reassigning several patrol officers to a new unit that would focus exclusively on violent gangs. The Gang Street Enforcement Team, or GSET, had a clear mandate:

Respond to gang violence with intensive, ongoing enforcement efforts. GSET targeted any illegal behavior by an active violent gang. This included anything from driving without a license or registration, to drinking in public, to selling drugs. The goal was to get and keep the attention of violent gangs. At the same time, the unit was clear with the gangs: “We’re here because you’ve been violent, and we will be here until the violence stops.” Because officers in the unit were free from regular patrol duties, they could stay with a gang for as long as was necessary to curb violence.

The department then began reaching out to other law enforcement agencies

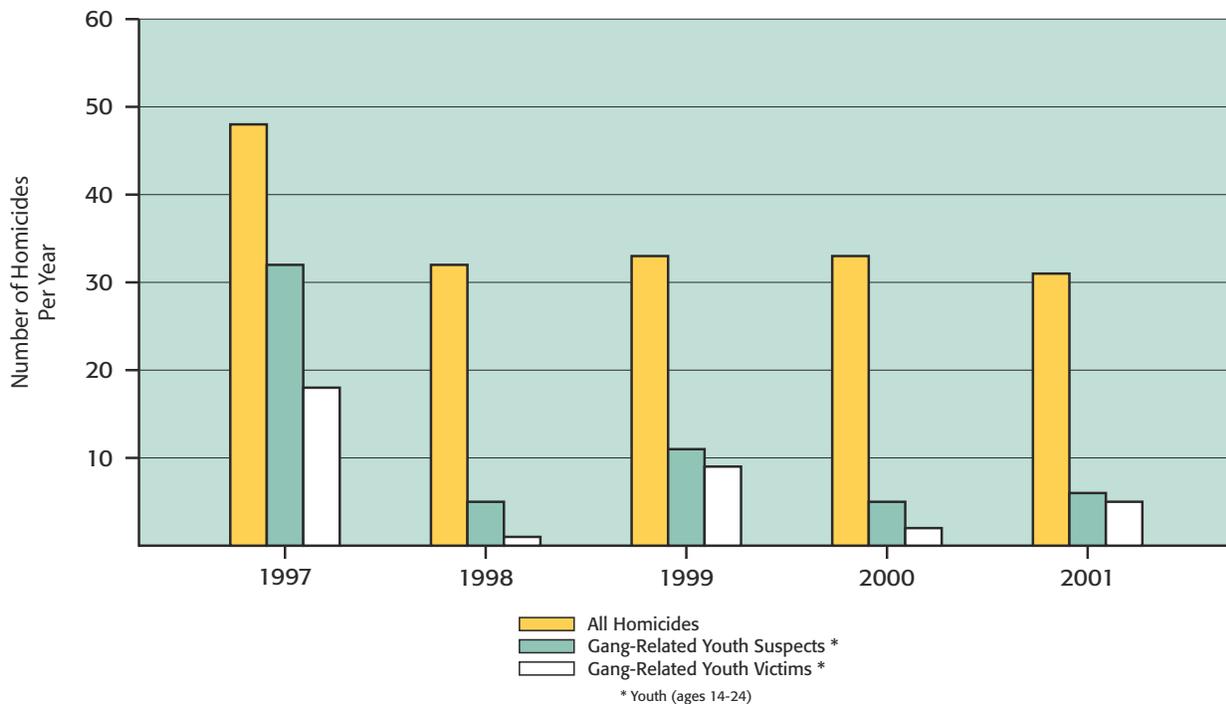
that could help target active violent gangs. The goal was to link the efforts of all the local, county, state, and federal law enforcement agencies already at work on the problem of gang violence in the county. Joining in the effort, which the participants dubbed Peacekeeper, were the county district attorney’s office, the probation department, the sheriff’s office, police departments in neighboring cities, the California Youth Authority parole office, the California Department of Corrections parole office, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the U.S. Attorney’s office.

**Communicating with gang members in a new way.** These agencies

not only pooled their traditional resources, they joined together to spread the message GSET had started sending about violence. They wanted to communicate *directly* an unambiguous message about the consequences of violence—homicide, in particular—to gang members throughout the city. The partners used a wide variety of methods to get this message out. The most common was a group meeting with youth, which the partners referred to as a “forum,” borrowing from Boston’s example. Most forums involved youth on probation or parole who were at high risk of becoming involved in gang violence (as either victims or perpetrators). Forums were also held at local secure facilities for youth

## Gang-Related Youth Homicides Stockton 1997-2001

(Operation Peacekeeper began September 1997)



(particularly those about to be released) and at schools and recreation centers.

In these meetings, representatives from each agency provided a brief message to gang members: “If any member of your gang commits an act of violence, you won’t just hear from the police department, you will hear from all of us. We will be working together, and we will focus on your entire gang until the violence stops.” In addition, probation and parole officers met individually with gang members to communicate law enforcement’s message about the consequences of violence. The message was always balanced with a genuine offer for services provided by gang outreach workers, social service agencies, and the faith community.

The Peacekeeper law enforcement partners had organized themselves to act quickly and vigorously when gang violence occurred, using everything from interagency missions, to “buy and busts,” to priority prosecutions by the district attorney. Frequent and regular meetings to share information and sharpen interagency strategies were a prominent feature of the initiative. The key was to ensure that gang members viewed as credible the warning that serious violence would be met with intensive ongoing enforcement efforts.

**Using data to move from an educated guess to an informed strategy.** The Stockton police department also undertook a comprehensive analysis of serious youth violence to guide the partnership’s

efforts. *Their goal was to cut through the complexity and number of gangs to get a better handle on which gangs and gang members were driving violence.* This analysis provided critical information the partners used in strengthening their effort. First, they confirmed that gang violence did indeed play a significant role in the overall problem of violence in Stockton. More than 50 percent of all homicides were gang-related and a

large portion of the gang homicides were driven by conflicts between Norteno and Sureno gangs.<sup>4</sup> One gang, the Southside Stockton, was particularly violent and became the target of successful long-term enforcement efforts led by the United States Attorney’s office.

The analysis of homicide also showed that—as in Boston—a large proportion of the youth who were involved in

## Communication is Critical

**The message about the consequences of violence must be clear and direct.** Most youth in gangs get their information about the consequences of violence second hand. And the message they receive is almost always inaccurate. Depending on the source, it is exaggerated to intimidate or minimized out of bravado. The Peacekeeper partners met with gangs just about anywhere and in any way to ensure youth knew exactly what would happen if they were violent.

**The message must be credible.** The law enforcement partners were careful not to threaten to put all gangs “out of business.” Instead, they made a promise they believed they could keep: If you do violence, we will use any legal tool available to “keep the pressure on” until the violence stops.

**The message must provide youth with a choice.** Peacekeeper’s strategy was to reach high-risk youth with the message about violence *before* they became involved in a serious violent crime. This provided youth with a choice. The law enforcement agencies worked with community groups and social service agencies to provide a genuine offer of services. The result was a more realistic and compelling choice than many of the youth had ever been given before. Community members and groups recognized the initiative’s commitment to *preventing* homicide rather than reacting to it—and they supported the Peacekeeper partners in their efforts to reduce violence.

homicides were on probation or parole. Based on this information, the partner agencies stepped up their supervision of gang members who were at the highest risk of violence. The county's probation department initiated probation checks at those times and in those places that seemed most closely linked to violence (Friday night parties, for example, became a prime target). They modeled some of these efforts on Boston's "Night Light" program in which probation officers walked streets and neighborhoods plagued by violence, actively checking on their highest-risk probationers.

**Ensuring youth have meaningful alternatives to violence.** Stockton also worked with officials from San Joaquin County to invest in programs that provided gang-involved youth with meaningful alternatives to violence.<sup>5</sup> For example, they used existing funding streams, such as federal Local Law Enforcement and Juvenile Accountability Incentive Block Grant funds, to support increased gang outreach efforts. They also worked with the local Private Industry Council to provide jobs to youth living in high-risk neighborhoods. Over time, many of these gang outreach efforts were integrated into a broader countywide effort to develop community centers that serve high-risk neighborhoods. Gang outreach workers now work in close partnership with community probation officers, school officials, and other members of decentralized integrated-service teams to offer a wide range of public and private services. Key services include employment services,

wrap-around services for youth and their families, and services designed to improve school performance.

**The result: A comprehensive, cost-effective strategy.** These efforts combined to form a practical, robust

strategy to reduce gang-related youth homicide. Gang-related homicides among youth were reduced from 18 in 1997 to just one the following year and remained low each year from 1999 through 2001—a period during which adult homicide rates varied

## The Value of Analyzing Data

The tough question both Stockton and Boston had to answer was how to make progress on what seemed to be an epidemic. The answer lay in the analysis of youth violence. The research partnership that supported these efforts mapped youth homicides, collected basic demographic data on the victims, and examined the criminal histories of victims *and* offenders. These analyses enabled the working groups in both cities to answer some simple but important questions.

- Gangs played an important role in more than half the youth homicides in Boston and Stockton, but they represented less than 1 percent of young people in those cities. This confirmed it was worth paying attention to gangs, but it also hinted that the problem was manageable.
- Youth homicide was restricted to those areas in which gangs were most active. This suggested the law enforcement partners could focus their efforts on particular areas, rather than stretch their limited resources over an entire city.
- Though both cities had many gangs, relatively few were active at any one time. This suggested that the law enforcement agencies could focus their efforts on just a few gangs at a time.
- The individuals "driving" violence had long and varied criminal histories and many were on probation or parole. The continual involvement of these individuals in illegal behavior actually made them vulnerable to law enforcement agencies.

These kinds of insights revealed that law enforcement agencies and their partners not only had sufficient resources but the right kind of resources to address youth violence.

## The Advantages for Public Managers

- Using data to target enforcement efforts promises to be more effective. It builds public confidence in the police by avoiding the perception of profiling, indiscriminate “stop and frisks,” and similar practices. As we have seen, the Ceasefire approach uses information about precisely who is responsible for driving violence to guide law enforcement efforts.
- The analysis of the factors driving violence also provides public managers with important information about how well public agencies and programs are performing. Both Boston’s and Stockton’s analyses of youth homicide showed that increased supervision drove down the number of probationers and parolees involved in homicide, confirming the value of investing in this strategy.
- Employing the Ceasefire approach does not require major new grants or income streams. In both Stockton and Boston, most of the resources necessary to implement the Ceasefire approach were already there—Ceasefire provided guidelines for deploying these resources in a more strategic manner.

**Step 2.** Analyze the youth violence problem and use the results in designing the particulars of the local approach.

**Step 3.** Directly and repeatedly communicate the message about violence and its consequences to active gangs and gangs not currently active but “at risk” of violence.

**Step 4.** Respond to those gang members and gangs that don’t get the message about violence with a well-coordinated, intensive law enforcement effort—and keep the pressure on until the violence stops.

**Step 5.** Provide at-risk youth and their families with referrals to community centers, job programs, after school programs, alcohol and drug treatment programs, and social services that provide a range of constructive alternatives to violence.

The experience of Boston, Stockton, and other cities that have implemented the Ceasefire approach has provided a powerful set of tools for addressing youth violence. New communication strategies, new ways of supervising probationers at high risk of violence, and new partnerships between police and community groups are just a few examples. But successfully addressing youth violence requires more than simply duplicating another city’s effort. Stockton used its analysis of homicide to fashion a response to a gang problem that was strikingly different from the problem in Boston. One of the most useful lessons that Stockton provides is that

little in Stockton (see page 3). Violent crime at schools decreased as well. The first year the city and county outreach workers were assigned to local high schools, violent crime dropped almost 40 percent at those schools.

Over time, Stockton has incorporated new resources and programs into a focused, well-defined strategy to control gang-related youth homicide. For example, its police department has developed a unit that targets the local illicit market for guns, and it has a strong ongoing relationship with the U.S. Attorney’s office to pursue

“Project Exile” prosecutions of violent felons. But even with the addition of more resources to counter gang violence, the core elements of the approach are surprisingly simple and could be relatively easily employed by any city or county to implement a more effective strategy for reducing serious youth violence.

**Step 1.** Assemble the partnership, including municipal, county, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, community groups, and public social service agencies providing outreach services to youth at risk of gang violence.

## Shifting the Orientation of Law Enforcement Agencies from Reaction to Prevention

Community policing, problem-oriented policing, and their variants helped shift the orientation of police departments toward prevention. The Ceasefire approach extends this trend to other important agencies and institutions in the criminal justice system. In Stockton, representatives from local, state, and federal agencies—the district attorney’s office, the U.S. Attorney’s office, ATF, state parole agencies, and correctional institutions—go to high-risk youth *before* they become involved in serious violence.

The law enforcement agency representatives warn youth about the stiff sentences and heightened street enforcement efforts they will face if they commit violent crimes. But these representatives also make it clear they are doing this to save the lives of these youth, who are, in fact, the most frequent victims of gang violence. The participation of gang outreach programs, the faith community and social service providers adds credibility to the message about saving lives and providing youth with a genuine alternative to violence.

local efforts must be driven by a comprehensive and ongoing analysis of the local problem.<sup>6</sup>

**Afterword: The Paradox of Sustainability.** While it is now clear that problem-solving partnerships can dramatically reduce violent crime, it is less clear how to sustain such partnerships and corresponding crime reduction over time. Ironically, a partnership’s focus on violence reduction may actually decline because of its success in reducing violence. Once the problem has diminished, money, time, and other scarce resources are diverted to new problems and the partnership

founders. This seems to be what has happened to Boston’s Operation Ceasefire, which was the model for the Stockton program, but which has now “collapsed under the weight of its own success.” (Boston Globe article, July 5, 2002.) Thus, it is apparent that one of the most difficult tasks a partnership may face is to keep funding and attention focused on the program even after it has become successful.

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The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the Attorney General’s Office or the Health and Human Services Agency.

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Harvard researchers included David M. Kennedy and Anthony A. Braga, senior researchers at the Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and Anne M. Piehl, an associate professor of public policy, also at the Kennedy School.

<sup>2</sup> *Youth* homicides are those of young people aged 14 to 24, while *juvenile* homicides are those of young people aged 14 to 18.

<sup>3</sup> David M. Kennedy, Anthony A. Braga, Anne M. Piehl, and Elin J. Waring, October 2001, *Reducing Gun Violence: The Boston Gun Project’s Operation Ceasefire*. Washington DC: National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Braga, Gillian Thomson, and Stewart Wakeling, 1999, *The Nature of Youth Homicide in Stockton*. Unpublished working paper.

<sup>5</sup> The core group of service providers included the Employment and Economic Development Department, the jointly administered City of Stockton and San Joaquin County Youth Outreach Services program, the Center for Positive Prevention Alternatives, El Concilio, Lao Family Community Services, the Whole Life Center, the Community Partnership for Families of San Joaquin, the Vietnamese Voluntary Organization, and the Asian Pacific Self-Reliance Association.

<sup>6</sup> Boston is, in fact, using this problem-solving approach to respond to a recent increase in homicide. Notably, their analysis showed that homicide was increasing in an age group older than that formerly targeted by the Ceasefire partners, requiring modifications in their local strategy.

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