



How Focused Deterrence Contributes to Reducing Gun Violence

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Focused Deterrence: A Strategic Law Enforcement Approach to Reducing Serious Crime

Framework and core components

Focused deterrence is a policing strategy that emerged from Boston PD's Operation Ceasefire in the 1990s, representing an evolution in how law enforcement addresses serious gang violence ([Braga and Weisburd, 2012](#)). This evidence-based approach enhances traditional enforcement capabilities by creating more targeted and strategic interventions, while leveraging a whole-of-government approach and services.

The strategy leverages a critical operational insight: most serious crime is driven by a small number of chronic offenders. Research shows that just 10 percent of the most criminally active individuals account for approximately 66 percent of crime ([Braga and Kennedy, 2020](#)). This approach to concentration provides law enforcement with clear objectives for strategic intervention.

The operational elements of focused deterrence include (Kennedy):

1. **Tactical Problem Selection:** Identifying specific crime patterns like group homicides, open-air drug markets, or domestic violence
2. **Multi-Agency Task Force Formation:** Establishing partnerships with probation, parole, prosecutors, and federal law enforcement agencies, and others
3. **Intelligence Development:** Leveraging patrol unstructured street- knowledge to identify key offenders, criminal groups, and their operational patterns
4. **Coordinated Enforcement Operations:** Designing targeted operations that maximize all available legal tools against identified offenders and groups
5. **Community Partnership Integration:** Coordinating enforcement actions with community-based interventions and social services

6. **Direct Messaging:** Communicate enforcement consequences and behavioral expectations to recurrent and serious offenders, including victims and survivors of crimes

The approach prioritizes swift and certain sanctions over severity, allowing officers to respond immediately to violations using existing legal authorities rather than waiting for lengthy formal processes.

Nationwide law enforcement implementation

Since Boston's pioneering effort, focused deterrence has expanded nationally through federal initiatives like Project Safe Neighborhoods. Police departments across the U.S. have adapted the strategy for:

- **Gang/Group Violence:** Through specialized gang units using Group Violence Intervention (GVI)
- **Drug Market Operations:** Through targeted Drug Market Intervention (DMI) strategies
- **High-Risk Individual Offenders:** Through focused supervision and enforcement

Case: Oakland Police Department's Ceasefire Implementation

Oakland PD's experience demonstrates both the effectiveness and operational challenges of focused deterrence. Facing homicide rates of 31.8 per 100,000 in 2012, nearly 7 times the national average, Oakland PD partnered with technical advisors to implement Ceasefire ([Cunningham et al., 2024](#)).

Evaluation data showed Oakland PD's Ceasefire unit drove:

- Over 50% reduction in shootings and homicides citywide (2012-2019)
- 43% reduction in gang-involved shootings
- The longest sustained homicide reduction in department history

However, the program faced sustainability challenges. When OPD discontinued dedicated Ceasefire operations in 2000, violence resurged. Similar challenges emerged during COVID-19 staffing shortages.

Oakland PD's 2023-2024 revitalization offers valuable lessons for departments. Following an operational audit, the department:

- Restructured weekly Shooting Review meetings with executive-level participation
- Consolidated the Ceasefire Unit and Crime Gun Intelligence Center under unified command
- Dedicated Special Resource Sections to high-violence neighborhoods
- Required 60-90 day operational plans from specialized units

These adjustments contributed to renewed violence reductions in 2024.

Implementing focused deterrence in your city

Departments considering focused deterrence should assess six operational capacities:

1. **Command Commitment:** Chiefs and command staff must prioritize violence reduction as a measurable departmental goal with specific benchmarks
2. **Intelligence Capacity:** Departments need analytical capacity for ongoing problem analysis, including consider partnering with academic institutions for support and evaluation
3. **Interagency Coordination:** Police must lead multi-agency partnerships, requiring dedicated liaison roles and regular operational meetings
4. **Dedicated Personnel:** Successful implementation requires full-time unit assignment with experienced supervisors managing daily operations
5. **Enforcement Resources:** Departments need both traditional enforcement capacity and specialized teams focused on intelligence-led operations
6. **Operational Sustainability:** Develop succession planning for key positions and institutionalize practices through department policy

Considerations for law enforcement

The operational flexibility of focused deterrence allows departments to tailor tactics based on:

- Local crime patterns and gang structures
- Available personnel and specialized units
- Prosecution resources and federal partnerships
- Community relationships and trust levels

Key tactical elements include:

- Using existing warrant service as strategic leverage
- Coordinating probation/parole enforcement
- Deploying federal prosecution for gun crimes
- Conducting intelligence-driven surveillance operations
- Leveraging asset forfeiture and civil enforcement tools

Evidence-based outcomes

Rigorous evaluations demonstrate clear law enforcement benefits. Studies showed statistically significant crime reductions and confirmed focused deterrence produces moderate to large effects on targeted crime problems.

For police chiefs and executives considering implementation, the evidence supports focused deterrence as a force multiplier that:

- Maximizes existing enforcement authorities
- Reduces reliance on reactive patrol
- Improves clearance rates through focused investigations
- Builds measurable crime reduction outcomes
- Enhances community partnerships without compromising enforcement

As departments face evolving crime challenges with limited resources, focused deterrence offers a proven operational framework that maintains enforcement effectiveness while improving community outcomes. Success requires sustained command commitment, adequate resources, strong multi-agency partnerships, and continuous operational assessment to maintain program integrity and effectiveness.