

# Project Safe Neighborhoods: A Targeted and Comprehensive Approach?



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In late 2017, Attorney General Jeff Sessions unveiled the U.S. Department of Justice's plan to reduce violent crime in the United States. Instead of creating a new program, Mr. Sessions announced the dramatic expansion of Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), an approach created in the early 2000s that emphasizes multi-agency and multi-jurisdictional partnerships to address violence.<sup>1</sup> PSN has been a part of the Justice Department's violence reduction efforts in varying degrees since its inception, but now, according to the Attorney General, it will be the centerpiece.

In launching the "reinvigoration" of PSN, Mr. Sessions described the lessons learned over the past 17 years and, surprisingly, emphasized that the current iteration of PSN "will take a comprehensive approach to public safety—one that includes prevention, enforcement, and reentry efforts—while ensuring that Department prosecutors focus on the work they do best: investigating and prosecuting crimes."<sup>2</sup> On the surface, the Attorney General's statement uncharacteristically appears consistent with a smart-indeed of a tough-on-crime approach.<sup>3</sup> But the devil is in the implementation details.

PSN is more of a framework with loose parameters than a particular program or strategy. It allows the Justice Department and its U.S. Attorneys to shape how they want to apply these principles in their local districts. The history of this initiative shows that U.S. Attorneys have exercised their allowed discretion and pursued a variety of strategies under the PSN banner. Some were truly comprehensive and targeted toward a small subset of the most violent actors. Others merely drove up arrest and conviction numbers without targeting any particular subset of offenders.

Current U.S. Attorneys implementing PSN may not be able to choose among a variety of different strategies like their predecessors. No federal violence reduction strategy can be divorced from the Justice Department's overall priorities, which, under the current leadership, have emphasized increasing the number of arrests and lengths of sentences for all crimes.<sup>4</sup> Thus, there is legitimate concern that U.S. Attorneys will ignore much of what has been learned from the history of PSN and instead implement the initiative in ways that are neither comprehensive nor targeted, even while remaining consistent with the PSN principles outlined by the Attorney General.

## I. Two Models

PSN is based on research showing that a small number of people commit a disproportionately large number of crimes and violent acts.<sup>5</sup> Violence reduction strategies, thus, should hone in on deterring those actors from committing crimes instead of engaging in broad efforts that indiscriminately sweep up large populations that are more marginally involved. For example, instead of broadly focusing on young people, a targeted approach would key in on those who are connected to the specifically defined problem, such as young people who use firearms in the commission of violence.

In the early days of PSN, U.S. Attorneys followed one of two general models based on this targeted approach. The first was known as the "focused deterrence" or "pulling levers" model that was piloted in Boston in the mid-1990s when the city faced one of the country's highest youth homicide and violent crime rates. In response, the Boston Police Department teamed with researchers from Harvard University to develop the Boston Gun Project (also known as Boston Ceasefire). The project team created a task force and incorporated state and federal law enforcement partners as well as social services and other service providers. Their goal was to zero in on the 1 percent of the youth population who were involved in violent gangs but were responsible for more than 60 percent of the city's youth homicides.<sup>6</sup>

These targeted individuals were brought in for meetings, or "call-ins," with the task force and given clear messages. Those who commit violence would be arrested and charged with crimes that carried severe consequences. But a vital element to this approach was that it was not one-sided: a credible deterrent enforcement option is crucial, but other non-enforcement levers also must be pulled to achieve the desired outcome. Thus, the task force also provided those who opted to desist from crime and violence with meaningful assistance—job training, counseling, and other social services—to help make the choice permanent. The results from the Boston Gun Project were significant, with the youth homicide rate in the city dropping by 63 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Contrast that approach with Project Exile, which started in Richmond, Virginia, to respond to that city's increase in homicide and gun crimes during the 1990s. Project Exile is a deterrence model that focused specifically on prosecuting

*Federal Sentencing Reporter*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 192–196, ISSN 1053-9867, electronic ISSN 1533-8363.  
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gun crimes with the goal of sentencing offenders to lengthier periods of incarceration. Federal, state, and local prosecutors would review every gun crime in the district and decide the venue in which the case should be brought. A significant number of these prosecutions would be taken to federal instead of state court under statutes that were easier to prove and carried mandatory minimum sentences.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the Boston Gun Project, Project Exile was concerned only with enforcement. Even its “prevention” efforts were limited to a media and billboard campaign to inform the public and the targeted population about this new effort. In other words, it was the “stick” without the “carrot.”<sup>9</sup>

Reviews of Project Exile have been mixed. One study concluded that the strategy reduced homicides yearly between 16 and 22 percent compared to the national average reduction of 10 percent.<sup>10</sup> But other evaluations have been more skeptical. An analysis by criminologists Stephen Raphael and Jens Ludwig conclude that “the reduction in Richmond’s gun homicide rates surrounding the implementation of Project Exile was not unusual and that almost all of the observed decrease probably would have occurred even in the absence of the program.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, Project Exile did not necessarily drive the homicide decline. This conclusion is consistent with a general finding by the National Academy of Sciences, which indicated, “Most studies estimate the crime-reducing effect of incarceration to be small and some report that the size of the effect diminishes with the scale of incarceration.”<sup>12</sup>

## II. The Current Approach: Early Indications

While Project Exile was not necessarily a comprehensive approach, it at least targeted a defined group of actors. Unfortunately, the current iteration of PSN has the real potential to be neither targeted nor comprehensive. The flaw is not in PSN’s framework or its guiding principles, which according to Mr. Sessions are: (1) leadership by the U.S. Attorney; (2) partnerships with a wide range of engaged stakeholders; (3) targeted and prioritized enforcement; (4) prevention of additional violence; and (5) accountability by measuring impact on violent crime.<sup>13</sup> Rather, U.S. Attorneys will have a difficult time reconciling DOJ’s tough-on-crime philosophy with the lessons learned from previous PSN programs that emphasized a targeted and comprehensive violence reduction strategy.

### A. Targeted and Prioritized Enforcement

Consider the third principle articulated by Mr. Sessions, which repeatedly emphasizes the need for targeted and prioritized enforcement.

We have learned that focused enforcement efforts yield the greatest reductions in violent crime. In addition, there have been significant advances in technology and data availability that enable us to better identify enforcement priorities. All enforcement efforts should harness this full range of available

information and technology to identify the locations within the district in *greatest need of comprehensive violent crime reduction efforts and the offenders who are driving the violence in those areas*. We must then target those offenders for prosecution in the jurisdiction that can provide the most certain and appropriate sanction. By using the most effective law enforcement tools and techniques to identify and prosecute *the most violent offenders*, we will send the clear message that we will protect communities against those that choose to do them harm.<sup>14</sup>

This articulation should serve as reassurance that PSN will remain focused on combatting violent crime and targeting the most violent offenders. But the Justice Department has diluted the meaning of violent crime through policies that consider virtually all crimes to have a nexus with violence. For example, Mr. Sessions in January announced the reversal of an Obama-era policy that limited federal prosecutions involving marijuana in states that have legalized its possession, distribution, or cultivation in some form. Part of the justification given for rescinding the guidance was the need “to disrupt criminal organizations, tackle the growing drug crisis, and thwart violent crime across our country,”<sup>15</sup> even though studies have repeatedly shown no evidence of a link between marijuana decriminalization and increases in violent or other crime.<sup>16</sup> The purported connection to violent crime was also the reasoning that the Justice Department provided to prioritize the prosecution of immigration crimes.<sup>17</sup>

Broadening the meaning of “violent crime” also leads to a broad definition of the “most violent offenders,” as exemplified recently by the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Northern District of Alabama. That office announced a partnership with the local district attorney’s office to jointly examine cases and determine which should be prosecuted federally.<sup>18</sup> In essence, this is a version of the Project Exile model that is less targeted due to the absence of an important factor: there is no indication that the types of cases will be constrained to violent crimes. In fact, the U.S. Attorney, in discussing his office’s attention to “the worst of the worst,” said his focus is on those who commit not only gun and violent crimes, but also immigration and drug crimes because they are DOJ priorities. According to the U.S. Attorney, “I’ve never met a nonviolent drug dealer. Nobody has.”<sup>19</sup>

Another example is the recent federal prosecution and conviction of Steven Morales under the “Worst of the Worst” initiative in New Mexico. Morales pled guilty to violating a federal firearms statute and could face a 15-year mandatory minimum sentence as an armed career criminal for possessing one round of ammunition. According to the press release from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, his previous convictions consisted of “burglary, larceny, criminal damage, receiving stolen property, escape from jail, possession of methamphetamine, disarming a police officer, and aggravated fleeing a law enforcement officer.”<sup>20</sup> Although some of these

predicate offenses are serious, the question remains whether Morales should be someone considered to be one of the worst of the worst.

### **B. Prevention of Additional Violence**

PSN's fourth principle—prevention of additional violence—likewise has the potential to be a hollow requirement.

We have also learned that although enforcement is at the heart of violent crime reduction efforts, prevention and deterrence of additional crime are required for lasting impact. Accordingly, PSN now explicitly recognizes that violence reduction partnerships must work to prevent and deter crime by prioritizing efforts such as ensuring public awareness of the violent crime reduction program and enforcement results; communicating directly to offenders about the consequences of continuing violent behaviors; and supporting locally-based prevention and reentry efforts.

The Attorney General's inclusion of the importance of prevention efforts for long-term violence reduction should be an important signal and quite possibly can be viewed as tacit acknowledgement that primarily relying on increasing arrests and incarceration to reduce crime is not a sustainable strategy. The overall message, however, is diminished in light of how DOJ proposed to use its appropriations for both Fiscal Years 2018 and 2019.

In expanding PSN, the Justice Department advocated for the elimination of a number of grants to states and localities that specifically supported evidence-based violence prevention efforts. DOJ's proposed budget cut the Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation (BCJI) Program, which supports place-based strategies that combine law enforcement, community policing, prevention, intervention, and treatment, and neighborhood restoration. It also eliminated the Community-Based Violence Prevention Initiative that provides resources for youth violence prevention work through street-level outreach, conflict mediation, and the changing of community norms to reduce shootings and killings. Even Youth Mentoring Grants and the Byrne Justice Assistance Grants (JAG) Program were drastically reduced, which are flexible formula grants that states, localities, and tribal jurisdictions can use for prevention efforts.<sup>21</sup> A large portion of those cuts now support PSN, and U.S. Attorneys could conceivably maintain a commitment to the prevention of violence. But the signal given by the Justice Department through its budget shows that violence prevention work is a diminished priority for the agency.

### **C. Community Trust Building**

Even the second PSN principle, which emphasizes the need for the development of collaborative relationships among federal, state, and local partners, could be weakened due to larger Department priorities.

We have learned that effective violence reduction depends on working in partnership with a wide range of engaged stakeholders. The United States Attorney must develop and sustain vital partnerships with federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement and prosecutors; work jointly to identify the most significant violent crime problems facing the district and develop a coordinated plan of attack; and effectively use all available resources, including existing task forces and initiatives. *Community support is integral to the success of these crime-fighting efforts, and robust partnerships should include community groups and victims' advocates.* Law enforcement or academic research entities can also be of great assistance in helping to target enforcement efforts against the most violent offenders.<sup>22</sup>

For the Justice Department, the mechanisms are already in place to work closely with law enforcement agencies and their state and local counterparts through existing task forces and other collaborations. But building partnerships with the community—which, the Attorney General emphasizes, is “integral” to PSN—takes more intensive work and effort, especially in neighborhoods that have experienced perpetually high rates of crime and violence. These communities—often communities of color—have registered lower levels of trust in the motives and efficacy of law enforcement agencies and the criminal justice system. This stems not only from past individual policies and strategies such as Stop and Frisk but also from a history of policing that enforced racial hierarchies—from slavery to Jim Crow to the War on Drugs.<sup>23</sup>

The lack of trust in policing may also be behind the recent increases in homicides in certain cities across the United States, according to a report by DOJ's National Institute of Justice that examined two versions of the so-called Ferguson Effect.<sup>24</sup> Many have purported that homicides spiked because law enforcement began to substantially scale back “proactive policing” (e.g., traffic and pedestrian stops to obtain information or arrest suspicious individuals for minor violations) after the heightened criticism of law enforcement following the 2014 killing of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. But another version theorizes that the “[r]ecent controversial incidents of police use of lethal force against African-Americans may have ignited a longstanding ‘reservoir of discontent,’ reduced reliance on and cooperation with the police, and spurred homicide increases in some African-American communities.”<sup>25</sup>

In other words, an integral part of any violence reduction strategy must be an intentional effort to build trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve. Building trust is not merely an aspirational norm; it is an essential crime-fighting strategy. Trust is needed for people in the community to share information about crimes with investigators and is often a prerequisite for victim and witness to meaningfully participate in prosecutions.

Establishing trust must be approached as an intentional, long-term, and comprehensive process. It cannot be cabined off to one-time events like “Coffee with a Cop” or Midnight Basketball” nor isolated to a Community Policing unit.<sup>26</sup> Rather, building trust requires law enforcement to examine and change their procedures and policies that govern the daily interaction with members of the community. A roadmap already has been piloted under the Justice Department’s National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice.<sup>27</sup> Working intensively in six cities across the country, DOJ has partnered with a team of policing experts and U.S. Attorneys since 2014 to implement focused deterrence strategies while simultaneously implementing changes to department-wide police training and procedures in order to deliberately increase legitimacy and recognize the current and past history of policing in communities of color.

Unfortunately, current DOJ priorities do not include efforts to build police–community relations. In 2017, the Department stepped away from conducting serious investigations of police departments that exhibited a pattern of discriminatory policing practices.<sup>28</sup> It also revamped programs like the Collaborative Reform Initiative from its original purpose to respond to voluntary requests from local law enforcement agencies for assistance on how to improve community and constitutional policing practices. Now, Collaborative Reform has been transformed into yet another vehicle that broadly addresses violent crime.<sup>29</sup> U.S. Attorneys should resume these activities in their original form in order to truly engage and partner with the community on comprehensive violence reduction efforts.

### III. Conclusion

The lessons learned over the 17-year history of PSN, as well as other violence reduction initiatives and research supported by the Justice Department, are well captured in the principles articulated by Attorney General Sessions and could very well be a framework for implementing comprehensive violence reduction strategies that target the most violent offenders. They also have the potential, if implemented with fidelity, to garner the support of the community. But the obstacles posed by Justice Department’s overall philosophy may be too much of a contradiction to achieve all of these goals.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund F. McGarrell, Natalie Kroovand Hipple, Nicholas Corsaro, Timothy S. Bynum, Heather Perez, Carol A. Zimmermann, & Melissa Garmo, *Project Safe Neighborhoods—A National Program to Reduce Gun Crime: Final Project Report* (Michigan State University, Feb. 2009), available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/226686.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Press Release, U.S. Dept. of Justice, Attorney General Sessions Announces Reinvigoration of Project Safe

Neighborhoods and Other Actions to Reduce the Rising Tide of Violent Crime (Oct. 5, 2017), available at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-sessions-announces-reinvigoration-project-safe-neighborhoods-and-other>.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Chung, *Smart on Crime: An Alternative to the Tough vs. Soft Debate*, Center for American Progress (May 12, 2017, 8: 53 AM), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/criminal-justice/news/2017/05/12/432238/smart-crime-alternative-tough-vs-soft-debate/>.

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Sessions, *Being Soft on Sentencing Means More Violent Crime. It’s Time to Get Tough Again*, Wash. Post, June 16, 2017, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jeff-sessions-being-soft-on-sentencing-means-more-violent-crime-its-time-to-get-tough-again/2017/06/16/618ef1fe-4a19-11e7-9669-250d0b15f83b\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.0939aafc41e9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jeff-sessions-being-soft-on-sentencing-means-more-violent-crime-its-time-to-get-tough-again/2017/06/16/618ef1fe-4a19-11e7-9669-250d0b15f83b_story.html?utm_term=.0939aafc41e9).

<sup>5</sup> McGarrell et al., *supra* note 1.

<sup>6</sup> David M. Kennedy & Anthony A. Braga, *The (Un)Known Universe: Mapping Gangs and Gang Violence in Boston*, in *Crime Mapping and Crime Prevention* 219–62 (David Weisburg ed., 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Anthony A. Braga & David L. Weisburg, *Focused Deterrence and the Prevention of Violent Gun Injuries: Practice, Theoretical Principles, and Scientific Evidence*, 36 Ann. Rev. Pub. Health 55–68 (Mar. 2015), available at <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031914-122444>.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Dept. of Justice, National Institute of Justice, *Program Profile: Project Exile*, CrimeSolutions.gov (May 4, 2015), <https://www.crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=413>.

<sup>9</sup> Nathan DiCamillo, *Sessions’ Tough-on-Crime Tactics Have a History of Failure, Scholars Say*, Newsweek, Mar. 12, 2017, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/sessions-tough-crime-tactics-fail-scholars-566765>.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Rosenfeld, Robert Fornango, & Eric Baumer, *Did Ceasefire, Compstat, and Exile Reduce Homicide?* 4(3) *Criminology & Pub. Pol’y* 419–50 (2005), available at <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/831e/25a9b98a58520be80608b559ce11f3f0b53b.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Steven Raphael & Jens Ludwig, *Prison Sentence Enhancements: The Case of Project Exile*, in *Evaluating Gun Policy: Effects on Crime and Violence*, 251–86 (Jens Ludwig & Philip J. Cook eds., 2003).

<sup>12</sup> National Research Council, *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States* 156 (J. Travis, B. Western, & S. Redburn eds., 2014), available at <https://www.nap.edu/read/18613/chapter/7#156>.

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum from Jeff Sessions, U.S. Attorney General, to All United States Attorneys: Project Safe Neighborhoods (Oct. 4, 2017) [hereinafter Sessions Memo], available at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1001581/download>.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* (emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> Press Release, U.S. Dept. of Justice, Justice Department Issues Memo on Marijuana Enforcement (Jan. 4, 2018) (emphasis added), available at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-issues-memo-marijuana-enforcement>.

<sup>16</sup> Angela Dills, Sietse Goffard, & Jeffrey Miron, *Dose of Reality: The Effect of State Marijuana Legalizations*, Policy Analysis No. 799, Cato Institute (Sept. 16, 2016), available at <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/dose-reality-effect-state-marijuana-legalizations>; Edward M. Shepard & Paul R. Blackley, *Medical Marijuana and Crime: Further Evidence from the Western States*, 4(2) *J. Drug Issues* (Jan. 13, 2016), available at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022042615623983>.

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- <sup>22</sup> Sessions Memo, *supra* note 13 (emphasis added).
- <sup>23</sup> National Network for Safe Communities, *Issue Brief, Reconciliation* (n.d.), [https://nnscommunities.org/uploads/NNSC\\_Issue\\_Brief\\_Reconciliation.pdf](https://nnscommunities.org/uploads/NNSC_Issue_Brief_Reconciliation.pdf).
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