



NIJ

Research Report

Reducing Gun Violence

Community Problem
Solving in Atlanta



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Reducing Gun Violence: Community Problem Solving in Atlanta

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Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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Foreword

This Research Report is part of the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ's) Reducing Gun Violence publication series. Each report in the series describes the implementation and effects of an individual, NIJ-funded, local-level program designed to reduce firearm-related violence in a particular U.S. city. Some studies received cofunding from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services; one also received funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Each report in the series describes in detail the problem targeted; the program designed to address it; the problems confronted in designing, implementing, and evaluating the effort; and the

strategies adopted in responding to any obstacles encountered. Both successes and failures are discussed, and recommendations are made for future programs.

While the series includes impact evaluation components, it primarily highlights implementation problems and issues that arose in designing, conducting, and assessing the respective programs.

The Research Reports should be of particular value to anyone interested in adopting a strategic, data-driven, problem-solving approach to reducing gun violence and other crime and disorder problems in communities.

The series reports on firearm violence reduction programs in Boston, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Detroit.

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*Arthur L. Kellermann, Dawna Fuqua-Whitley, and
Constance S. Parramore*

The Problem and the Approach

When firearm-related deaths and injuries among Atlanta's young people¹ began to reach record heights in the early 1990s, it became evident that law enforcement could no longer go at it alone (see "Gun Violence in Atlanta"). The city turned in a new direction, adopting a strategic, problem-solving approach. A similar approach had been used elsewhere, most notably in Boston, where it had shown remarkable success in reducing juvenile homicides.²

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The key to problem solving is ongoing, communitywide action involving multiple public agencies and private organizations. Because this approach is data driven, researchers work side by side with practitioners. All partners share the same concern about the problem, but because they have different missions, achieving consensus is no easy task. Problem solving is also a dynamic process, requiring frequent shifts in direction.³

Initially, Atlanta's goal was to preempt juvenile gun

violence by breaking the chain of illegal events leading up to these crimes—disrupting illegal gun supply, demand, and carrying, and rehabilitating offenders.⁴ Community groups were to have a major role. The goal evolved during the life of the project, both in response to research findings and when resource constraints and other priorities limited or curtailed the involvement of some partners.

In its final form, the Atlanta gun violence project consisted of a small but determined coalition of Federal, State, and local law enforcement agencies and prosecutors, with the Atlanta Police Department (APD) in a central role. Tactics ranged from traffic stops and directed patrol⁵ to Federal prosecution of adult gun traffickers. Although all planned tactics were employed with varying degrees of success, some were not fully implemented.

Violent crime fell in Atlanta during the intervention, but the researchers could not link the decline to the

GUN VIOLENCE IN ATLANTA

Like many other U.S. cities in the mid-1980s, Atlanta experienced an epidemic of gun violence that continued for about a decade. In the 10 years before the Atlanta gun violence project was launched, the city experienced a major surge in gun violence, with juveniles and young adults as the primary targets.

Atlanta Reflected the Nation

The backdrop was the now-familiar nationwide scene in which firearm homicide rose 50 percent across all age groups and even faster among young people. Figures for firearm assaults were also disturbing: between 1987 and 1992, the rate of handgun crimes committed against youths 16–19 years of age was nearly three times higher than the national average.*

In Atlanta, as elsewhere, firearm violence struck young African-Americans particularly hard. In Fulton County, which includes most of the city of Atlanta (see exhibit 1 in the next chapter, “Problem Solving Through Project PACT”), murders of young black men between the ages of 14 and 17 increased fourfold between 1984 and 1993. The magnitude of gun violence indicated that the conventional approach—rapid response to 911 calls—was not working.

* Zawitz, M.W., and K.J. Strom, *Firearm Injury and Death From Crime, 1993–97*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Selected Findings, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, October 2000, NCJ 182993.

intervention, because violent crime also fell statewide and nationally. Also, implementation problems limited researchers’ ability to measure the program’s impact. Nevertheless, some positive effects were evident. The partnerships that matured

throughout the project still endure. Other communities facing similar problems can benefit from Atlanta’s experience, if they recognize that innovation requires long-term commitment and flexibility and that change comes slowly.

Problem Solving Through Project PACT

With researchers as participants, problem solving can increase the understanding of the targeted problem so that more focused strategies can be developed.

Atlanta's decision to adopt the problem-solving approach to juvenile gun violence was prompted by its participation in Project PACT (Pulling America's Communities Together). The five counties constituting the core of Metro Atlanta were included (see exhibit 1).

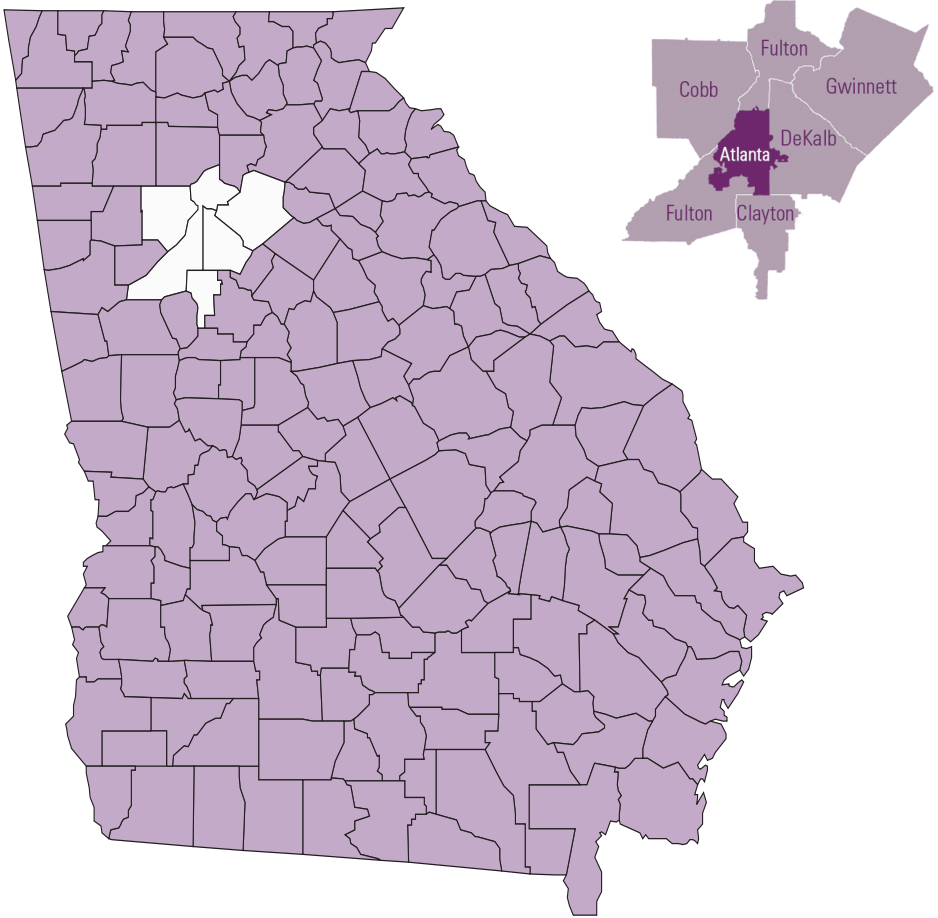
PACT was a U.S. Department of Justice initiative established in 1993 to help diverse institutions within a community collaborate on public safety issues in order to maximize the impact of broad-based strategies that were locally designed and implemented. Several other Federal agencies also were involved in PACT.⁶

Major steps in problem solving include identifying an issue on which to focus; obtaining detailed data to measure the extent and nature of the problem; designing an intervention; monitoring its implementation; modifying or otherwise refining the intervention; and measuring its impact.

Jurisdictions facing resource constraints rarely invite researchers to be partners, but in Atlanta, researchers were involved from the start. With researchers as participants, problem solving can increase the understanding of the targeted problem so that more focused strategies can be developed. During the course of the Atlanta project, the researchers' role evolved—they became more directly involved, trying to keep the effort on track.

Project PACT identified homicide, gun violence, and juvenile crime as the major community concerns in Atlanta. But this consensus needed to be confirmed by local data and analysis. Data gathering and problem definition began in 1995 and continued throughout the project (see the next chapter, "Measuring the Extent of the Problem"). After the baseline data were collected, three experts⁷ were brought in during the spring of 1996 to brief Atlanta PACT members on how elements of the problem-solving

Exhibit 1. The five Metro Atlanta counties in Project PACT



Note: Fulton, DeKalb, Cobb, Clayton, and Gwinnett counties constitute Metro Atlanta (combined population 2,684,000). The city of Atlanta (population 401,000) is situated largely in Fulton County, with a portion extending into DeKalb.

approach had been used to reduce gun violence in Boston and Kansas City.

Following these sessions, project participants decided to focus on reducing juvenile firearm violence and devised a three-pronged approach to achieve the goal:

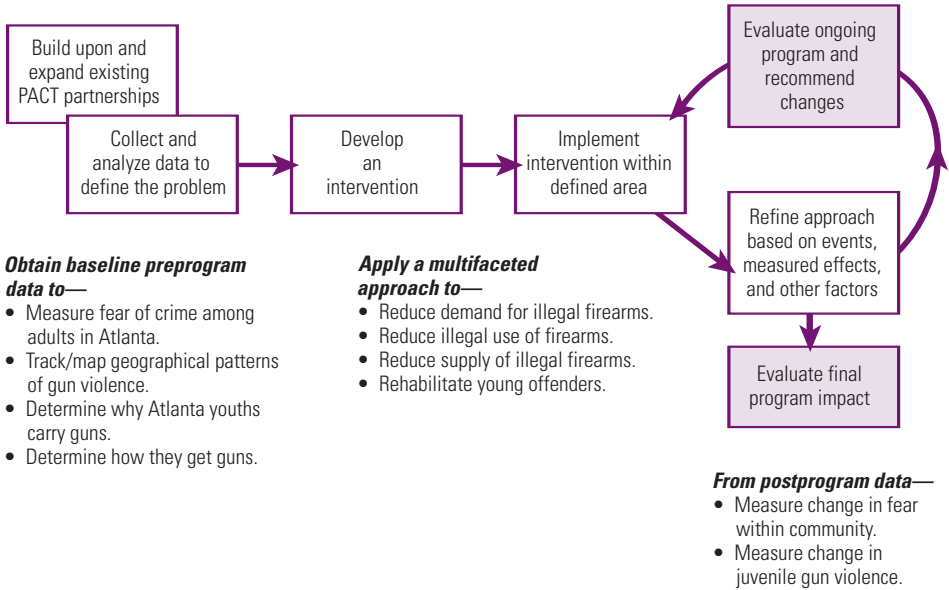
- Use a problem-solving approach to plan, implement, monitor, refine, and evaluate the program.
- Apply a strategic approach to violence prevention that combines the expertise of researchers with the experience of practitioners.
- Identify, implement, and evaluate a mix of strategies to prevent illegal carrying and use of firearms by juveniles.

This three-part strategy to reduce juvenile firearm violence was divided into more specific objectives:

- Measure fear of crime among adults in the project area.⁸
- Map and track temporal and geographical patterns of juvenile gun violence.

- Determine where and why juveniles acquire guns.
- Develop a comprehensive intervention to reduce juvenile gun violence.
- Implement the intervention in a defined area of Atlanta.
- Monitor and evaluate the intervention and refine the approach based on events, measured effects, and impact.
- Evaluate the impact of the refined program on juvenile gun crime and on fear of crime among adults in the targeted area.

The strategy involved a cyclical process whereby results from ongoing evaluation of an experimental program or intervention are interpreted by the researcher-practitioner team and the intervention is modified accordingly (see exhibit 2). This dynamic has been expanded and continued in programs subsequent to Atlanta PACT (see the last chapter of this report, “Reducing Firearms Violence in Atlanta Today”).

Exhibit 2. Project PACT in Atlanta—Program objectives and design***Overall objective: Reduce incidence of juvenile gun violence and homicide***

Measuring the Extent of the Problem

The researchers set out to discover why Atlanta residents owned guns, the patterns of firearm-related crime in the city, and youths' views and experience with gun possession and violence.

Gauging adult fear of crime

As their first step, the researchers surveyed adults in the five PACT counties about their firearms ownership and to get a baseline measure of their perceptions and fear of juvenile violence. To track changes over time, the survey was conducted three times between 1995 and 1999.

Relationship between level of juvenile crime and fear of crime. Not surprisingly, citizen concern varied with the level of crime in each county. Residents of Fulton County, where juvenile crime was highest, expressed the most concern. In Cobb and Gwinnett counties, where the rates were much lower, citizen concern was lowest. This county-specific pattern did

not change over time. Citizens of all five counties expressed more concern about juvenile crime in Metro Atlanta as a whole than in the county where they lived.

Legal gun ownership. Some residents stated that they own firearms because they are afraid of crime. According to the first survey, almost 40 percent of households in the five counties kept one or more firearms in their homes. (This number did not change appreciably over the course of the next two surveys.) As is often the case in urban communities, the majority of gun-owning households contained more than one handgun.

Tracking patterns of juvenile gun violence

How common was juvenile gun violence in Metro Atlanta? To find out, the researchers used data from a number of sources. From State crime statistics they compiled counts of juvenile weapons offenses and

COPS AND DOCS

The Georgia Firearm Injury Notification system—better known by its nickname “Cops and Docs”—was established in 1995 by Emory University’s Center for Injury Control under a separate NIJ grant. Through this system, 34 law enforcement agencies, 21 emergency medical centers, and 5 medical examiners in the Metro Atlanta area* sent data to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, which forwarded it to the Center for Injury Control for linkage and analysis of victim characteristics, incident location, circumstances, and weapon type.

These data were compared with firearm-related data from the Atlanta 911 system to generate reports showing trends (e.g., days and times of most gun violence activity) and geographic information system maps showing “hot spots” of gun violence activity down to the street level. This information was then relayed back to Federal, State, and local law enforcement officials.

For more information, see—

- Profile No. 24, “Youth, Firearms, and Violence—Atlanta, GA,” in *Promising Strategies to Reduce Gun Violence*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, February 1999, NCJ 173950, available at www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org/pubs/gun_violence/173950.pdf: 111.
- “Community-Level Firearm Injury Surveillance: Local Data for Local Action,” by A.L. Kellermann, K. Bartolomeos, D. Fuqua-Whitley, T.R. Sampson, and C.S. Parramore, *Annals of Emergency Medicine* 38(4)(Oct. 2001): 423–429 (reprints available).

*Metro Atlanta consists of the five counties that surround and include the city, shown in exhibit 1.

assaults; from county medical examiners’ data and State vital statistics they calculated the number of firearm-related deaths; and from a local firearm injury reporting system (see “Cops and Docs”), they compiled counts of nonfatal shootings of juveniles.

Fulton County stands out.

Juvenile weapons⁹ offenses in Metro Atlanta peaked in 1993 and fell thereafter. In four of the five counties,

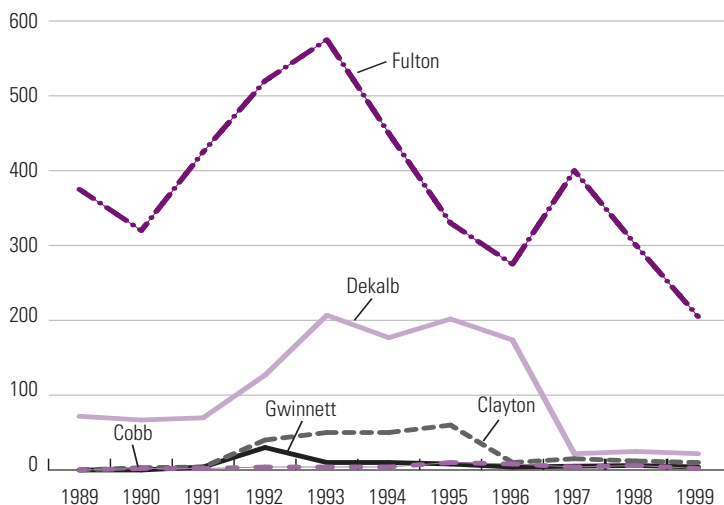
weapons offenses either declined or remained low throughout the entire period. Fulton County was the exception: Juvenile weapons offenses peaked there in 1993, fell until 1996, then started to rise again, but declined sharply in 1998 and 1999 (see exhibit 3).

Young victims, young offenders.

Many firearm homicides were committed against very young victims. A striking number of homicide

Exhibit 3. Juvenile weapons offenses by county within Metro Atlanta, 1989–99.

Number of weapons offenses



Source: Georgia Criminal Justice Information System Network, Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

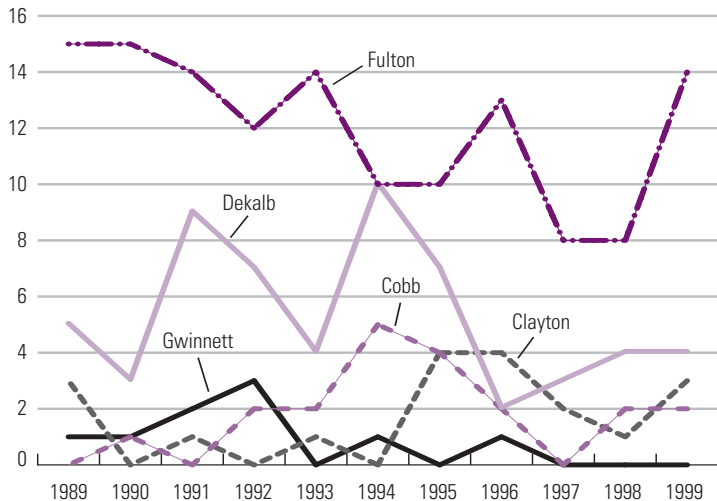
victims (almost 40 percent) were between 15 and 24 years of age. Nearly 80 percent of juvenile firearm homicide victims in the Metro Atlanta area were African-American, and 84 percent were male. For the most part, shooters were of the same gender and ethnicity and in the same age range as their victims. Again, Fulton County stood out—each year, more than half the Metro Atlanta area’s juvenile firearm homicides occurred there (see exhibit 4).

Listening to Atlanta’s juveniles

Where, why, how, and when juveniles acquire and carry guns are questions sometimes best answered by young people themselves. For this reason, researchers conducted four focus group sessions with Atlanta youths and individual interviews with incarcerated juveniles (see exhibit 5).

Exhibit 4. Juvenile firearm homicides, by county within Metro Atlanta, 1989–99*

Number of fatal
gunshot wound victims



Source: Georgia Criminal Justice Information System Network, Georgia Bureau of Investigation

*Death certificate date

Juveniles' views. To encourage the young people to be candid, the sessions were divided by age group, gender, and ethnicity. The first group consisted of 15- to 16-year-old African-American males who lived in urban areas; the second was white males in the same age range who lived in the suburbs; the third group was African-American females ages 15 to 16; and

the fourth group was younger African-American males.

A majority of focus group participants saw a direct connection between drugs, gangs, and violence.

Many youths, particularly the African-Americans surveyed, considered violence to be part of their everyday life. Blacks reported more frequent exposure to violence

Exhibit 5. Juvenile offenders’ responses about gun acquisition and use*

Gun use behavior	Males (%)	Females (%)
Method of acquisition of first gun		
■ Given	39	58
■ Found accidentally	12	8
■ Borrowed	20	25
■ Bought	17	8
■ Stolen	12	0
Feelings experienced while carrying a gun		
■ Felt safer	29	75
■ Felt scared or anxious	34	33
■ Felt energized, excited, or powerful	39	42
■ Felt dangerous	7	8
■ Did not identify feeling different	21	0
Ever pointed a gun at a person	83	75
Ever fired a gun at a person	74	33
Loaned a gun to someone within 6 months prior to arrest	34	25
Sold a gun to someone else within 6 months prior to arrest	39	25

Note: Figures may not total 100 percent due to rounding or because some subjects reported more than one feeling.

*Responses were obtained through semistructured, private interviews between June and November 1995 with 63 offenders incarcerated at 5 detention centers in Metro Atlanta. For a complete description of the survey’s methodology and results, see Ash, P., A.L. Kellermann, D. Fuqua-Whitney, and A. Johnson, “Gun Acquisition and Use by Juvenile Offenders,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 275(22)(June 12, 1996): 1754–1758. Exhibit (with minor changes) reproduced with permission.

than whites. Almost all—white and black alike—claimed they could easily obtain a gun. Gun carrying was seen as quite common.

Participants’ perceptions changed little between the first sessions in 1995 and the

second in 1999. Although many participants across all of the focus groups seemed largely resigned to the daily threat of violence, youths in the second round of focus groups were more hopeful that it could be reduced.

Juvenile offenders' views.

The sample of incarcerated youths consisted of juvenile offenders ages 13 to 18. Like the other youths, the juvenile offenders reported that guns were readily available. Finding a seller was no problem, in their view. More than half said they would recommend the street as a place to buy a gun.

These young people had strong feelings about carrying guns—29 percent of males and 75 percent of females said they did it to feel safer (for protection), and approximately 40 percent overall said it conferred status and made them feel more “energized” and “powerful” (see exhibit 5).

Developing the Intervention

After analyzing the baseline data, the researchers suggested to the rest of the PACT team that gun violence could be viewed as the result of a predictable chain of events: Illegal demand for firearms by juveniles is satisfied by illegal sources of supply, which leads to illegal acquisition and carrying—necessary preconditions to the use of a gun to commit a violent crime. Therefore, to prevent firearm-related crimes and acts of violence, this chain should be broken at one or more points before the gun is used.

How PACT proposed to break the chain of gun violence

Although Atlanta PACT planned to use some of the tactics that were developed in Boston and Kansas City, the team knew that this would not be enough. They also borrowed from approaches that have been used in many communities to reduce use of illegal drugs—

focusing in this case on guns rather than drugs.

The intervention that was developed had four broad goals:

- *Reduce illegal demand* for firearms using a combination of tactics, including youth outreach through community-based violence prevention, public education to reduce fear of crime, and high-visibility enforcement to enhance deterrence.
- *Reduce illegal supply* of firearms through proactive law enforcement, specifically targeting adult suppliers of guns to juveniles.
- *Reduce illegal carrying* of firearms by strengthening street-level enforcement and reducing juveniles' fear of victimization and/or by increasing their fear of arrest.
- *Rehabilitate juvenile gun offenders* through court-based diversion programs and other strategies.

The next chapter, “The Intervention Takes Shape,” discusses the strategies implemented toward achieving these goals.

Nationally, PACT was conceived to promote cooperation among agencies at the Federal, State, and local levels. In Atlanta, PACT was anchored by four key organizations:

- The Atlanta Police Department (APD).
- The Fulton County District Attorney.
- The Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF).¹⁰
- The U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Georgia.

Many other agencies and organizations had supporting roles. They ranged from the Governor’s Office to the city housing authority, from the Fulton County Sheriff’s Department to an organization known as Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (see “Atlanta PACT Partners”).

The plan required integrating the work of community-based organizations and Federal, State, and local law enforcement and juvenile justice agencies (see “Coordination Drives the Process”). As it turned out, the intervention did not proceed exactly as planned, in that few community-based groups became active in PACT, and some criminal justice agencies had to drop out. The strategy was reconsidered and modified as events dictated.

ATLANTA PACT PARTNERS

Members of Atlanta PACT are shown below. Key partners during the intervention and those who have remained partners in Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) are indicated.^a (For a discussion of PSN, see last chapter, “Reducing Firearms Violence in Atlanta Today.”)

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

U.S. Attorney for the
Northern District of Georgia
PACT key partner; PSN

Atlanta Field Office, Bureau
of Alcohol, Tobacco and
Firearms (ATF)
PACT key partner; PSN

U.S. Drug Enforcement
Administration (DEA)
PACT key partner; PSN

Federal Bureau of
Investigation

Atlanta High Intensity Drug
Trafficking Area **PSN**

United States Marshal **PSN**

STATE LAW ENFORCEMENT AND OTHER GOVERNMENT

Governor’s Office

Georgia State Board of
Pardons and Paroles **PSN**

Georgia Department of
Corrections **PSN**

Georgia Bureau of
Investigation **PSN**

Georgia Department of
Children’s and Youth
Services^b

Fulton County District
Attorney

Georgia Public Safety
Commissioner

Georgia National Guard

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Atlanta Police Department
(APD)
PACT key partner; PSN

Atlanta Department of
Corrections **PSN**

Fulton County Juvenile Court^b

Fulton County District
Attorney
PACT key partner; PSN

Housing Authority of the City
of Atlanta **PSN**

Metropolitan Atlanta
Regional Transit Authority
(MARTA) Police Services

Atlanta City Solicitor
PACT key partner; PSN

Atlanta Mayor’s Office **PSN**

RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS

Emory University: Emory
Center for Injury Control
PACT key partner; PSN

Emory University: Greater
Atlanta Data Center
PACT key partner

Burruss Institute, Kennesaw
State University

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Atlanta Downtown
Improvement District and
Atlanta Ambassadors

United States Probation
Office **PSN**

Georgia Sheriffs’ Association

Georgia Association of Chiefs
of Police

Georgia District Attorneys
Association

PSN = Participates in Project Safe Neighborhoods

Notes

a. All Metro Atlanta PSN participants are not represented here. For a more comprehensive list, see “Project Safe Neighborhoods Is Working: Violent Gun Crime Is Down About Fifteen Percent in Targeted Areas in Atlanta,” News Advisory, U.S. Attorney’s Office, Northern District of Georgia, December 11, 2003, available at www.usdoj.gov/usao/gan/press/12-11-03.html.

b. Dropped out due to resource constraints.

COORDINATION DRIVES THE PROCESS

The size and diversity of Atlanta PACT’s core and supporting organizations made it essential to create separate working groups to coordinate their multiple and interrelated activities:

Atlanta Project PACT working groups		
Operations group	Prosecutorial group	Steering committee
<i>Coordinated the work of law enforcement agencies.</i> ■ Atlanta Police Department. ■ ATF (Atlanta field office). ■ Other State and local law enforcement agencies (see list in “Atlanta PACT Partners” above).	<i>Reviewed case files and criminal histories to identify cases that could be federally prosecuted.</i> ■ Atlanta Police Department. ■ ATF (Atlanta field office). ■ Fulton County District Attorney. ■ U.S. Attorney.	<i>Provided overall coordination and policy direction.</i> ■ U.S. Attorney. ■ Atlanta Police Department. ■ ATF (Atlanta field office). ■ Fulton County District Attorney. ■ Other State and local agency heads.

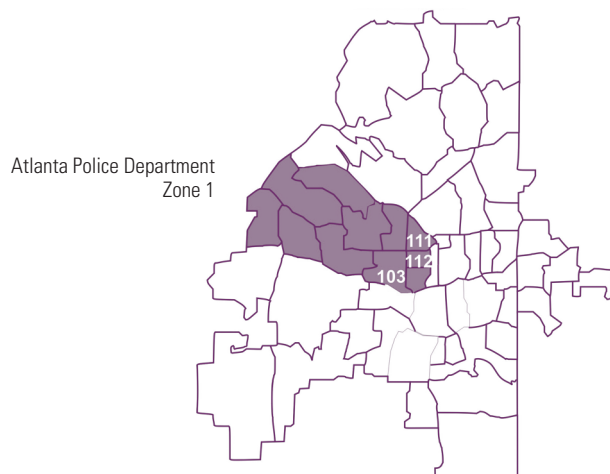
The Intervention Takes Shape

Geographic information system mapping of data generated from the Georgia Firearm Injury Notification System (see “Cops and Docs” on page 8) showed that the bulk of firearm assaults and homicides against juveniles and adults were concentrated in readily identifiable “hot spots.” These areas of Atlanta are severely disadvantaged economically and historically have had high rates of homicide and other violent crimes.

To test the intervention, the PACT steering committee decided to focus on one hot spot—three police beats in the northwest quadrant of inner-city Atlanta, within Zone 1 of the Atlanta Police Department’s six policing zones¹¹ (see exhibit 6). These three beats received the bulk of PACT’s deterrent and enforcement police activities.

The multifaceted intervention was phased in over a

Exhibit 6. The three police beats targeted by Atlanta PACT



Source: Atlanta Police Department

2-year period starting in the fall of 1997.

Implementing the intervention

Several strategies were implemented toward the stated goals of reducing juvenile demand for and carrying of illegal guns, reducing the supply of illegal guns, and rehabilitating juvenile offenders.

Reducing illegal demand for guns. Interviews with juvenile offenders indicated that their demand for guns was largely driven by the need to feel protected, compounded by little fear of arrest. This suggested that the best way to reduce demand might be to reduce fear of victimization and/or increase fear of arrest. The program adopted three main strategies toward these ends:

- *Education and outreach.* Project PACT leaders hoped to counter juvenile offenders' perceptions through public education and media campaigns. They wanted to convey positive messages that would reduce juveniles' fear of crime and create a sense that something was being done to stop gun violence. Many attempts were made to

engage the local media, but with little success.

Community groups also were viewed as a means to help with demand-reduction strategies. It soon became apparent, however, that funds were insufficient to enable them to expand their work in a major way. Furthermore, these groups found it difficult to coordinate efforts, particularly when they perceived that they were competing with each other for limited resources.

- *Strengthened enforcement.* To change juveniles' way of thinking, PACT leaders chose to strengthen street-level enforcement in hopes of deterring illegal carrying of firearms, particularly within the known hot spots of gun violence. The deterrent value of directed patrols was first demonstrated by the Kansas City Police Department,¹² and the Atlanta researchers hoped to replicate those results. To that end, the APD established the Guns and Violent Crime Suppression Unit (Guns Unit), modeled after the Kansas City experiment, to proactively patrol the three-beat target area. The Guns Unit was

directed to identify and arrest felons in possession of a firearm before the weapon was used.¹³

The Guns Unit worked hard, but competing priorities, suboptimal scheduling, and lack of coordination with other APD units hindered their efforts. For example, the unit also was responsible for investigating firearms assault cases citywide, which worked against the intervention by competing for the attention of unit officers.

- *Enhanced prosecution of target offenders.* Because the juvenile offenders interviewed said that adult felons and drug dealers were their primary source of guns, prosecuting these adults became an intervention tactic (deterrence). To put teeth into it, adult gun offenders who met certain criteria were referred for prosecution in Federal court. Identifying these candidates required close coordination between Federal, State, and local law enforcement officers working in concert with prosecutors from the Fulton County District Attorney's Office and the U.S. Attorney for

the Northern District of Georgia. The program was called "FACE-5" (Illegal Firearms in Atlanta Can Equal 5 Years in Federal Prison). Although only a small fraction of Atlanta's gun offenders were referred for Federal prosecution under the program, the FACE-5 list included some of the city's most notorious criminals. News of their sentences sent a strong message to the street that any felon caught illegally carrying or using a firearm could meet a similar fate.

Adult gun offenders who are not candidates for Federal prosecution also need to be deterred from illegal firearm use. The Fulton County District Attorney and the County Solicitor sought higher bonds and penalties, and a special prosecutorial unit was established to speed investigation and prosecution when a firearm was used to commit a crime. Further help in deterring illegal acquisition and carrying came when the State General Assembly enacted a law making it a felony for an individual previously convicted of a forcible felony to purchase or carry a firearm.

By April 2002, more than 35 violent repeat offenders had been sentenced to Federal prison for terms ranging from 3 years to 21 years.

Reducing supply of illegal guns. Crime lab analysis of projectiles recovered at crime scenes or from the bodies of victims can sometimes link different incidents and trace the weapon used in the crime to a specific owner. To help in this process, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) developed a system called the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN), which compares digitized images of projectiles to a database of images of bullets recovered from previous crime scenes and confiscated weapons that are test fired. The intervention tapped into this resource to identify patterns in Atlanta. To boost the number of projectiles submitted for analysis, two Atlanta area hospitals, including the city's only Level I trauma center, were asked to submit bullets recovered in surgery to the local crime lab. In addition, every confiscated weapon was test fired to generate projectiles for comparison.¹⁴

Subsequently, ATF launched Project LEAD¹⁵ and the Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative (YCGII). Both programs combined data from large numbers of firearm traces to identify illegal sales. If, for example, YCGII identified a single individual as the first purchaser of 15 guns seized from juvenile offenders, the data could provide the basis for a formal criminal investigation to determine whether that individual was breaking Federal firearms laws through straw purchases.¹⁶

A third tactic intended to reduce illegal supply of firearms never got off the ground. The researchers' surveys showed that adult handgun ownership is fairly common in Atlanta. They therefore reasoned that it might be possible to reduce theft and criminal diversion of firearms by encouraging gun owners to secure their firearms. A local public relations firm created a public education campaign, but the business community provided too little financial support to implement it.

Rehabilitating young

offenders. At the outset, project leaders hoped to engage the juvenile justice system by expanding intensive supervision of youthful gun offenders on probation. They reasoned that this would reduce youths' interest in illegally carrying and using guns.

The proposal won the support of the Fulton County Juvenile Court, but the court's case-load and other resource problems prevented it from actively participating. A series of other obstacles barred participation by the Georgia Department of Children's and Youth Services. These setbacks caused the PACT team to defer this part of the intervention indefinitely.

Did Atlanta PACT Reduce Juvenile Gun Violence?

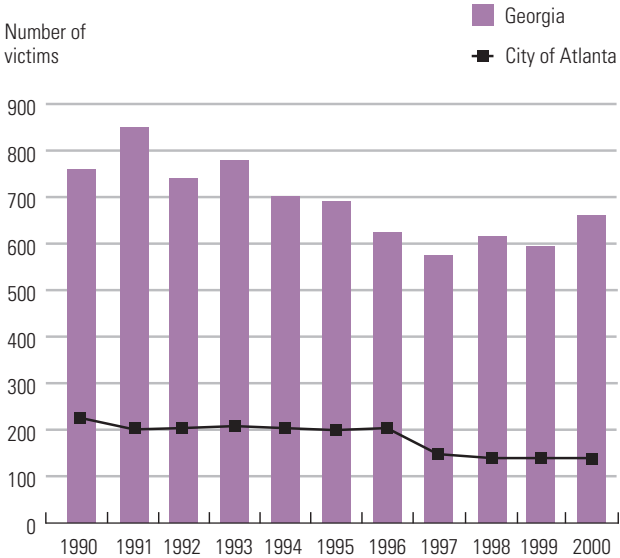
During the 6 years after the intervention started—from 1995 through 2000—the number of homicides in Atlanta fell 27 percent. The 134 homicides recorded in 2000 were the lowest number in the city in 30 years.

The dramatic decline was matched by a commensurate change in adults' perception of the severity of the incidence of juvenile violence—fewer saw it as a very serious or somewhat serious problem.

The most notable decrease was in Fulton County, the PACT intervention site. Juveniles' perceptions did not change appreciably during this time, however.

The decline in homicides probably cannot be attributed to Atlanta PACT, however, for three key reasons. First, Atlanta's homicide count began to fall 2 years before the intervention started. Second, a number of the strategies developed for the program were not implemented as designed. Third, the decrease in homicides was no greater within the three police beats that were the principal intervention focus, as would be expected if the intervention were the reason for the decline. Atlanta's decline in crime was mirrored by similar declines statewide (see exhibit 7).

Exhibit 7. Homicides in Georgia versus the city of Atlanta, 1990–2000



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics Web site, www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs, accessed March 10, 2005

Lessons for Other Communities

The Atlanta PACT team learned valuable lessons about applying the problem-solving approach to an issue as complex as gun violence. These are summarized below.

Building effective partnerships “from scratch” takes time and energy

For the researchers, key tasks included compiling and analyzing data, presenting findings, convening stakeholders and consulting with them to devise strategies, conducting evaluations, and then refining the effort. Each step took much longer than expected.

Initial data gathering and presentation may be time consuming, but they are relatively straightforward. Translating research findings into action by agency partners is a different matter. The success of many partnerships depends on personalities rather than organizational

structure, and this project was no exception.

Conceptual consensus about a problem does not guarantee a consensus about solving it

Everyone agreed that reducing juvenile gun violence was a worthy goal, but opinions varied on the magnitude of the problem and the best way to solve it. Officials in Fulton County—and particularly the city of Atlanta, where the problem was most serious—were more inclined than those in the other four counties to commit major resources. Over time, lack of interest led these counties to drift out of the coalition.

The cross-disciplinary cooperation that PACT was designed to nurture was not fully realized. For example, because the focus was so heavily on law enforcement, officials were initially reluctant to offer the faith community a meaningful role. When

faith community leaders belatedly were approached for input and support, none stepped forward. At the outset, a large number of community nonprofits came to the table, but most of them left when they realized that PACT did not have the resources to pay for their involvement. As noted previously, State and local juvenile justice leaders wanted to participate, but their agencies' resources were stretched too thin.

In the real world of problem solving, involving researchers is key

Problem solving is an evolutionary process that can blur the traditional boundaries between evaluators and evaluated. By definition, the problem-solving approach calls for researchers, law enforcement, and other partners to collaborate (as shown in exhibit 2). During this process, researchers are an integral part of the intervention; their operational involvement is part of the program's design. Nonetheless, the research team should retain the external perspective of observer/evaluator as much

as possible during the monitoring and assessment stages of the program.

At first, the Atlanta PACT research team tried to distance itself from decision-making, but it soon became apparent this was not feasible. Team members were inexorably drawn in as they presented data, provided feedback, and attempted to engage additional partners. When the initiative began to lose momentum, the research team felt compelled to take a more active role through such actions as shuttle diplomacy between partners, active dissemination of data, and meetings with key stakeholders.

Local data are needed to prompt local action

Despite considerable research demonstrating the effectiveness of proactive policing elsewhere, many Atlanta officials were skeptical. They repeatedly quipped, "Atlanta isn't Boston." This prompted the researchers to probe the local problem of juvenile gun violence in depth. When the data showed the nature and magnitude of Metro Atlanta's problem, officials were more

willing to be engaged. It took local data to spur action.

Collaboration requires suspending self-interest

Law enforcement practitioners often speak of the three “Cs” of successful inter-agency efforts: communication, cooperation, and coordination. A fourth “C”—compromise—could be added. Throughout the intervention, concerns about “turf” surfaced repeatedly. For example, many participants were reluctant to share files and other information. Several had reservations about the feasibility of the project. A number were unwilling to commit resources to a metrowide venture they could not control.

It is difficult to focus on the long term when facing short-term challenges

Reluctance to back the project was not simply a matter of turf or ideology; it was often a practical matter of resources and logistics. Participating in PACT interventions often meant diverting people and/or resources

from other missions. At several points, immediate concerns took priority. For example, the Olympic Park bombing in 1996 diverted substantial Federal and local resources from PACT.

Change comes slowly to large, complex organizations

Large organizations often resist change. This can be manifested in delayed, altered, or thwarted innovations. Atlanta experienced all three at various points. For example, APD’s special gun unit created to deter illegal carrying through directed patrols did not achieve its most important objective: a sharp reduction in firearm violence and firearm-related 911 calls in the three-beat target area.

The researchers attributed this failure to differences in how the tactic was implemented in Atlanta from how it was implemented in Kansas City and Indianapolis. Rather than focusing on deterrence through directed patrol and high-visibility enforcement, the Guns Unit concentrated on generating gun seizures and arrests.

Lack of communication and local media coverage also undermined the intervention's deterrent effect. Local residents were unaware of the program.

In another tactical deviation from the planned intervention, regular APD units shifted their patrols to other beats when the Guns Unit appeared in the area. Thus, the Guns Unit essentially *replaced* rather than

supplemented the regular police presence in the target beats.

To achieve the intervention's objective, APD line officers and supervisors—as well as other city officials—would have had to significantly change their behavior patterns in accordance with the intervention's original design. Without that followthrough, the intervention could not be implemented as designed, and its impact was dissipated.

Reducing Firearms Violence in Atlanta Today

Atlanta PACT ended in 1999. On the strength of the inter-agency relationships created through PACT, Atlanta was invited to participate in a successor program, Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative (SACSI).

SACSI

Coordinated by the U.S. Attorney, SACSI was based on Boston's strategic problem-solving model of reducing crime at the local level, including its multiagency law enforcement partnership, its involvement of a research partner as a key component of the program, and its outreach to social service agencies and the community.¹⁷

Project Safe Neighborhoods

In 2001, an even more comprehensive program, Project

Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), superseded Atlanta SACSI. PSN is being carried out within all U.S. Attorney jurisdictions nationwide.¹⁸

Strategies developed through PACT and SACSI are being effectively pursued through PSN. These include—

- Selective use of directed patrols to deter illegal gun carrying.
- Systematic tracing of crime guns to identify and disrupt illegal sources of supply.
- Enhanced Federal and local prosecution to incapacitate repeat gun offenders and deter high-risk individuals (such as gang members).

The U.S. Attorney also integrated the highly successful Atlanta Mayor's Office of Weed and Seed program into PSN.¹⁹

Signs of progress are evident. Gun crime and violent crime in general appear to have declined overall in the PSN focus area. Atlanta Police Department records show that firearm-related crimes declined 44 percent, from 231 in 2002 to 130 in 2005. During the same period, violent crimes declined 37 percent, from 597 to 377.²⁰

Continued focus on these neighborhoods has yielded Federal sentences for several offenders involved in illegal drugs and guns—many of

them convicted of Federal firearms violations. Concerning arrests made in July 2005, an ATF official noted: “Firearms form the common link between gang crime, violent crime, and drug crime.”²¹

The homicide rate in Atlanta today is the lowest since 1965; Atlanta’s police chief attributes this success to the PSN partnerships. Researchers continue to play an active role in PSN, helping APD identify repeat offenders and design strategies to reduce firearm-related crime.

This research report is based on the authors’ reports to the National Institute of Justice:

- “Community Problem-Solving to Reduce Juvenile Gun Violence: Atlanta’s Experience,” March 2004, NCJ 204856, available at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/grants/204856.pdf.
- “Youth, Firearms and Violence in Atlanta: A Problem-Solving Approach,” April 2002, NCJ 194050, available at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/grants/194050.pdf.

Notes

1. The Atlanta project targeted youths 17 years old and younger, referred to in this report as “juveniles.” Youths ages 18 to 24 are considered young adults; 25 and older are considered adults.
2. Boston’s Operation Ceasefire was a strategic initiative that combined two tactics: *suppression* (by cracking down on illegal gun traffickers) and *deterrence* (through an innovative intervention that targeted gangs engaged in firearm violence). See Kennedy, D.M., A. Braga, A.M. Piehl, and E.J. Waring, *Reducing Gun Violence: The Boston Gun Project’s Operation Ceasefire*, Research Report, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2001, NCJ 188741, available at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/188741.pdf.
3. The problem-solving approach to community violence is described in *Understanding and Controlling Violence*, ed. A.J. Reiss and J.A. Roth, Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 1993.
4. In this report, “gun” and “firearm” are used interchangeably.
5. Directed patrol is a policing tactic whereby officers are freed from responding to calls for service and assigned to a high-crime area, in order to concentrate on investigating suspicious activities. The tactic has more recently been known as “intensive patrol.” Also see notes 12 and 13.
6. Project PACT was formed by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance. Other Federal agencies involved were the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the Office of National Drug Control Policy. Four experimental sites were chosen: Atlanta, Denver, Washington, DC, and the State of Nebraska. The Atlanta PACT grant was awarded October 1, 1994.
7. The experts were Lawrence Sherman, architect of the “Kansas City Gun Experiment” (see note 12, below), David Kennedy, and Anthony Braga. Kennedy and Braga are the Harvard researchers who helped Boston devise and implement Operation Ceasefire (see note 2, above).
8. As a local consciousness-raising measure only, not for evaluation purposes.
9. All weapons, not just firearms, are included in this count.
10. Formerly part of the U.S. Treasury Department, ATF is now the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives within the U.S. Department of Justice.
11. More than 80,000 people live in Zone 1, which covers 26 square miles.

12. An evaluation of the Kansas City project was published as *The Kansas City Gun Experiment*, by L.W. Sherman, J.W. Shaw, and D. Rogan, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1995, NCJ 150855, available at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/kang.pdf. The evaluation found that directed patrols in gun crime “hot spots” can reduce gun crimes by increasing the seizures of illegally carried guns.
13. Directed patrol was also used in Indianapolis—see McGarrell, E., S. Chermak, and A. Weiss, *Reducing Gun Violence: Evaluation of the Indianapolis Police Department's Directed Patrol Project*, NIJ Special Report, 2002, NCJ 188740, available at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/188740.pdf.
14. For more information, see www.nibin.gov.
15. Project LEAD was an ATF system introduced in 1996 that used information obtained from tracing crime guns to identify and prosecute illegal firearms traffickers.
16. Project LEAD was supplanted in 2001 by broader gun tracing initiatives. For more information about YCGII, see www.atf.treas.gov/firearms/ycgii.htm.
17. See Coldren, J.R., Jr., S.K. Costello, D.R. Forde, J. Roehl, and D. Rosenbaum, “Partnership, Problem-Solving, and Research Integration—Key Elements of Success in SACSII: Phase I Findings From the National Assessment of the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative,” final report to the National Institute of Justice, 2002, NCJ 204349, available at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/grants/204349.pdf.
18. For more information about Project Safe Neighborhoods, see www.psn.gov.
19. For information about the Office of Justice Programs' Weed and Seed initiative, see OJP Press Release, March 18, 2004, available at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/pressreleases/OJP04011.htm. Atlanta's Weed and Seed program is discussed at www.atlantaga.gov/mayor/weed_seed.aspx.
20. Internal correspondence, PSN Monthly Statistics, January–December, 2002–2005, Atlanta Police Department.
21. See “Indictments Unsealed in ‘Project Safe Neighborhoods’ Heroin Ring Prosecutions,” press release, U.S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of Georgia, July 28, 2005, accessed November 14, 2005, available at www.usdoj.gov/usao/gan/press/2005/07-28-05.html.

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About problem solving and violence

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