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Gun Enforcement and Gun Violence Prevention Practices among Local Law Enforcement Agencies: A Research and Policy Brief

By Christopher S. Koper¹

Introduction

Controlling gun crime continues to be a difficult challenge for policymakers and practitioners in the United States. In 2009, there were roughly 11,000 murders with firearms in the United States (calculated from Federal Bureau of Investigation statistics available at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2009/index.html>) and another 326,000 non-fatal violent crimes with guns (Truman and Rand 2010). The prevalence of guns is thought to contribute to particularly high levels of homicide in the United States (e.g., Hoskins 2001; Zimring and Hawkins 1997), where some estimates imply that the total costs of gun violence—including medical, criminal justice, and other costs—could be well over \$100 billion per year (calculated from Cohen et al. 2004; also see Cook and Ludwig 2000).

Yet finding common ground for legislative solutions to this problem is quite difficult, making it especially critical to effectively enforce existing laws and utilize other prevention approaches. Indeed, debates on controlling firearms violence often revolve around whether the nation needs tougher gun laws or better enforcement of laws that already exist. However, these debates are not well informed by systematic information on what law enforcement agencies are doing to reduce gun violence, the success of those efforts, and the factors that facilitate or hinder those efforts. In order to inform debate on these issues and to highlight successful enforcement and prevention strategies to reduce gun violence, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) undertook a national study of gun violence prevention efforts by local police in urban

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jurisdictions. The study's objectives were to: 1) to describe the range, scope, and prevalence of police efforts to reduce gun violence; 2) to assess which practices are most effective, both generally and in combination with different gun laws; and 3) to determine how these efforts can be improved.

Background: Police and Gun Crime

Police typically handle gun crimes reactively, investigating violent gun crimes and making arrests for illegal possession or carrying when they encounter violations during routine activities. To varying degrees, police also use proactive strategies to reduce gun crime. These include disrupting the illegal supply of firearms, reducing illegal gun possession and carrying, targeting known gun offenders and others at high-risk for gun violence, undertaking educational and preventive activities, and collaborating with other criminal justice, government, and community organizations on comprehensive initiatives that combine enforcement, prosecutorial, and prevention elements (e.g., see Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP] 1999).

However, despite efforts to promote many of these practices among police (e.g., International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP] 2008; OJJDP 1999), relatively little is known about how widely police use these various strategies or about the outcomes of these efforts. What is known of police efforts to reduce gun violence is largely anecdotal, based on descriptions or evaluations of strategies in a relatively small number of jurisdictions (e.g., Braga et al. 2001; 2008; Brill 1977; Center to Prevent Handgun Violence 1998; Dunworth 2000; Koper and Mayo-Wilson 2006; OJJDP 1999). Evidence suggests that there are substantial differences across jurisdictions in the intensity of gun enforcement and prevention efforts (e.g., Brill 1977).

However, there has been no systematic research to examine the range, scope, and prevalence of police efforts to reduce gun violence across the nation. Further, little is known about the effectiveness of many police strategies to reduce gun crime.

Overall, available evidence suggests that police efforts targeted on high risk places, behaviors, and actors are effective, particularly when conducted in the context of multi-agency problem-solving efforts. For example, crackdowns on illegal gun carrying in gun crime hot spots, often done through directed patrols focused on gun detection, appear effective in reducing gun crime and improving citizens' perceptions in targeted areas (Cohen and Ludwig 2003; McGarrell et al. 2001; Sherman and Rogan 1995; also see Koper and Mayo-Wilson 2006; Villaveces et al. 2000). Efforts targeted on high-risk groups such as gangs, probationers, parolees, and known chronic offenders are another important evidence-based approach to reducing gun crime. The "pulling levers" or "focused deterrence" approach that concentrates law enforcement, prosecution, and social service resources on high-risk groups, typically through face to face contacts known as "notification meetings", has become a popular approach of this sort that has been tested in several sites (e.g., Braga 2008; Braga et al. 2001, 2008; McGarrell et al., 2006, 2009; Papachristos et al., 2005; 2007; Tita et al., 2003). Pioneered in Boston, this strategy has become a blueprint for other successful local and national initiatives, including the federal government's Project Safe Neighborhoods program. The threat of federal prosecution for gun crimes, which often provides for much more harsh penalties than are available at the state level, is a central component of this approach.

More generally, it has become increasingly common for police to work collaboratively with other criminal justice, government, social service, and community organizations to diagnose and address gun violence problems using a multi-faceted, problem-solving approach (e.g., Koper

et al. 2010; OJJDP 1999). The pulling levers strategy is a leading example of this. The federal government has sponsored numerous initiatives of this sort such as the Partnerships to Reduce Juvenile Gun Violence Program (Sheppard et al., 2000), the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative (Roehl et al., 2006, 2008), and Project Safe Neighborhoods (McGarrell et al. 2009; also see www.psn.gov).

In contrast, police efforts to attack the supply side of the gun crime problem appear to have little or unknown effectiveness. Gun buyback or exchange programs that offer cash or other reimbursements to persons who relinquish their firearms to police do not appear to be an effective way of disarming high-risk persons or reducing the overall criminal supply of firearms (Callahan et al. 1996; Kennedy et al. 1996; Romero et al. 1998; Rosenfeld 1996; Plotkin, 1996; also see reviews in National Research Council, 2005: 95-96 and Sherman, 1997), though some argue that they have value as a community outreach and mobilization strategy (PERF 2010; Rosenfeld 1996). At the same time, there is scant evidence about the extent or effectiveness of police efforts to disrupt illegal gun markets through investigation of gun theft, gun trafficking, and other illegal gun sales. Many agencies, particularly in urban areas, appear to trace the sales histories of recovered guns with the assistance of ATF (the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives) and to work with ATF on efforts to attack illegal gun trafficking (ATF 2002; Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2000; OJJDP, 1999). However, there has been little in depth study or assessment of such efforts. The tools available to police to address illegal gun markets vary substantially depending on state and local gun laws (for instance, many states have no provisions for licensing gun owners or gun dealers or for regulating private sales). Yet even in jurisdictions with more restrictive gun laws, there has been little examination of police uses or experiences with these laws. Some studies show that locally-based efforts to disrupt gun

trafficking, discourage straw purchasing and illegal secondhand sales, regulate and work cooperatively with licensed gun dealers, and investigate corrupt or negligent gun dealers can reduce the flow of new firearms to criminal users (Braga and Pierce, 2005; Ridgeway et al. 2011; Webster et al., 2006a; 2006b; 2009). But whether such efforts can reduce the gun supply sufficiently to reduce gun crime is unclear.

Finally, education and prevention strategies conducted by or involving police include teaching children and youth about gun safety and the consequences of gun violence, promoting safe storage of firearms by adults through education and the distribution of lock boxes, and participating in a variety of other gang and violence prevention programs (e.g., OJJDP, 1999: 169-200). Research suggests that efforts to change gun-related attitudes and behaviors have not had great success (see review in National Research Council, 2005), but many programs of these sorts have not been evaluated.

In sum, current knowledge is rather limited on the use and effectiveness of police strategies to reduce gun violence. PERF's study thus sought to provide better information on current police efforts to reduce gun violence and the reported effectiveness of these approaches.

Study Methods

The study focused on large cities due to the concentration of gun crime in urban jurisdictions. In the fall of 2009, PERF surveyed all 270 primary law enforcement agencies serving cities of 100,000 or more people in the United States. Overall, 164 agencies (61%) responded to the survey. Among agencies serving cities of 200,000 or more, 71% responded. The survey captured extensive information regarding gun crime, gun laws and their enforcement,

gun recoveries (and handling of recovered firearms), weapons arrests, and the use and perceived effectiveness of over 40 gun enforcement and gun violence prevention strategies.

As shown in Table 1, agencies responding to the survey had over 1,100 officers on average; however, the midpoint for officer strength (i.e., the median) was 400. Similarly, the average population size of jurisdictions represented was slightly over 400,000, but half of the jurisdictions had fewer than 200,000 residents.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Study Respondents

	Average	25 th Percentile	Median	75 th Percentile
1) Officer Strength	1,115	229	400	839
2) Population	404,884	132,246	199,000	380,227
3) Gun Recovery rate (per 100K)	231	127	217	305
4) Weapons Arrest rate (per 100K)	118	62	97	156
5) Violent Gun Crime rate (per 100K)	239	86	196	337

Note: The number of agencies with available data for calculation was as follows: (1) N = 163; (2) N = 164; (3) N = 149; (4) N = 146; (5) N = 147.

Gun Crime, Gun Recoveries, and Weapons Arrests

Basic statistics on violent gun crime, gun recoveries, and weapons arrests in the study jurisdictions, averaged for the years 2006 through 2008, appear in Table 1.² The average rate of violent gun crime (i.e., murders, robberies, and assaults with guns) was about 239 per 100,000 in these cities, while the rates of gun recoveries and weapons arrests by police averaged 231 and 118 per 100,000, respectively. As shown in Table 1, there was also substantial variation in these measures across the cities. Cities ranking in the top 25% for gun crime (i.e., the 75th percentile or higher) had rates of gun crime that were at least 4 times as high as those of cities in the bottom 25% (i.e., the 25th percentile or lower) (337 or more per 100,000 versus 86 or fewer per

² Respondents were asked to report gun recoveries from all sources and to report weapons arrests as reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's annual Uniform Crime Reports program.

100,000). Similarly, gun recovery and weapons arrest rates were at least two and a half times higher for agencies in the top 25% on those measures as compared to agencies in the bottom 25% (respectively, 305 per 100,000 versus 127 per 100,000 and 156 per 100,000 versus 62 per 100,000). Further comparisons of gun recovery and weapons arrest rates relative to levels of gun crime are presented in a subsequent section of the report.

Processing of Recovered Firearms

The survey included several questions about the agencies' handling and disposal of recovered firearms. Virtually all of the responding agencies (97%) trace the sales histories of recovered firearms through the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) and/or through state-level gun data systems.³ A gun trace conducted by ATF is an investigation that typically tracks a gun from its manufacture through its first point of retail sale by a licensed dealer. It thus provides police with information about where and when a gun was first purchased at retail and about the buyer and seller involved in the transaction. Gun traces can be used to solve particular crimes and as a tool for assessing patterns in illegal gun markets. More than three-quarters of agencies that trace guns reported tracing all recovered guns (64%) or all guns associated with any crime (13%). Only 17% reported tracing guns only when needed on a case by case basis. However, the use of gun tracing for addressing illegal gun markets appears to be more limited. Whereas almost all respondents (93%) reported using tracing data to investigate violent crimes, only 53% reported using tracing data to identify retail sources of

³ Only 4% of agencies reported tracing guns through state systems only.

crime guns and only 61% reported using tracing data to identify other suppliers of crime guns such as “straw purchasers” and gun traffickers.⁴

Police also commonly check recovered firearms and related evidence in other ways. All agencies reported checking recovered guns against databases of guns reported stolen to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s National Crime Information System (NCIC). Similarly, virtually all respondents reported entering information on recovered bullets and ammunition casings into the National Integrated Ballistics Information System (NIBIN), a national system administered by ATF to match images of markings made on fired cartridges and bullets. This system can be used to link crimes and to assess patterns in the movement of firearms. More than half (57%) of the agencies using NIBIN reported entering information for all recovered bullets and casings rather than for just those linked to specific investigations. As its use expands, the utility of this system for law enforcement will continue to improve.

Nearly all of the agencies (91%) also attempted to restore obliterated serial numbers on recovered firearms. An obliterated serial number is widely recognized as an indicator that a firearm was illegally trafficked. However, over half of these agencies (55%) only attempted to restore the serial numbers of guns that were linked to specific investigations.

With respect to firearm disposal, 92% of agencies destroyed unclaimed firearms but 7% reported reselling them. Most agencies reported running background checks on persons to whom they return confiscated firearms (to ensure that they are legally eligible possessors); however, 14% did not conduct such checks.

⁴ Straw purchasers are legally eligible gun buyers who purchase guns for ineligible buyers or gun traffickers.

Gun Laws and Enforcement

The survey also inquired about selected gun control laws in the agency’s jurisdiction and the agency’s efforts to enforce those laws. As shown in Table 2, only 31% of large city agencies operated in jurisdictions requiring people to obtain a permit to purchase a firearm. Further, roughly three-quarters of the local agencies in jurisdictions requiring permits did not have authority or discretion over the granting of those permits.

Table 2. Gun Control Laws and Enforcement Activities Related to Permit Systems, Firearm Registration, and Carrying of Concealed Weapons	% Yes	% No
<i>State or locality requires that people have a permit to purchase a firearm</i>	31	69
If YES, agency has responsibility for granting these permits	27	73
If YES, agency has discretion in whether or not to grant permits	22	78
<i>State or locality requires registration of firearms</i>	35	65
If YES, use system to identify cases of potential straw purchasing and other illegal transfers	60	40
If YES, use system ensure compliance with laws by licensed gun dealers	54	46
If YES, use system to conduct audits to ensure possessors are still lawful	53	47
If YES, use system to identify cases of illegal gun trafficking	70	30
If YES, use system to notify officers about possible presence of firearms at locations	63	37
State or locality prohibits carrying of concealed weapons or requires a permit that is issued at the discretion of police (i.e., a “may issue” law)	40%	60%

Based on a survey of 164 urban police agencies. Unless otherwise noted, missing data rates were negligible.

Roughly one-third of the agencies operated in a state or locality that requires registration of firearms (Table 2). These agencies were asked a series of questions about ways that police might use registration systems to identify illegal gun transfers, illegal gun possessors, and other situations potentially involving firearms. Between 60% and 70% reported using registration systems to identify straw purchasing and other forms of gun trafficking and to warn officers of the possible presence of firearms at locations to which they are responding (for safety purposes). Slightly more than half (53%-54%) indicated using registration information to monitor the

activities of licensed dealers and to ensure that registered gun possessors have not become ineligible to own guns due to new convictions or other reasons. Hence, while many agencies with access to gun registration data report using them in these strategic ways, many others do not.

Agencies were also asked about laws regulating the carrying of concealed weapons. Overall, 40% of the jurisdictions prohibited concealed carry (4%) or required permits issued at the discretion of police (36%).⁵ Most agencies reported that their concealed carry laws had little impact on their ability to reduce gun crime, regardless of whether their carrying laws were restrictive or liberal. However, agencies with restrictive laws were more likely to report that these laws facilitated their efforts (29% to 16%).

Table 3 presents figures relevant to a number of additional gun laws. More than one-third of the agencies (38%) operated in a state or locality that required background checks for private sales of firearms. Yet only 28% of these agencies investigated illegal private sales on a regular basis, and 32% indicated that they never conduct such investigations. Among agencies that did not investigate these cases regularly, 43% cited resource constraints as a reason that they did not pursue more such investigations.⁶

⁵ Laws regarding the issuance of permits to carry concealed weapons are often referred to as “shall issue” or “may issue” laws. Shall issue laws require that police issue permits to those who pass requirements stipulated in the law (e.g., criminal history and training requirements). May issue laws, in contrast, give police discretion in granting these permits even when applicants are legally eligible.

⁶ Other agencies in this group often noted that the cases were handled by ATF or a state agency and/or that there were few such cases that came to the agency’s attention.

Table 3: Gun Control Laws and Enforcement Activities Related to Private Sales, Reporting of Gun Thefts, Regulation of Licensed Dealers, and Monitoring of Prohibited Buyers.	% Yes	Frequently/ Regularly	Occasionally	Never
State or locality requires background checks for private gun sales If yes, how frequently does agency investigate cases of potentially illegal transfers?	38 --	-- 28	-- 40	-- 32
States or locality requires gun owners to report losses or thefts of firearms If yes, how frequently does agency investigate cases under this law?	29 --	-- 44	-- 44	-- 12
Agency has responsibility for inspecting local gun dealers If yes, how often does agency inspect dealers?	21 --	-- 27	-- 61	-- 12
If yes, how often does agency investigate dealers suspected of making illegal sales?	--	16	62	22
Agency collects or receives records from NCIC or a state system on denied gun purchases If yes, how frequently does agency follow up on these cases?	36 --	-- 45	-- 47	-- 8

Based on a survey of 164 urban police agencies. Unless otherwise noted, missing data rates were negligible.

Similarly, 29% indicated that their state or locality requires gun owners to report losses or thefts of firearms. Such laws are intended to discourage people from making straw purchases or other illegal gun transfers and then falsely reporting the guns as stolen or missing. However, less than half (44%) of the agencies in these jurisdictions regularly investigated cases under these laws.

About one-fifth (21%) of the surveyed agencies had responsibility for inspecting local gun dealers. Studies suggest that closer monitoring of gun dealers helps to reduce the flow of new firearms into criminal markets (Webster et al. 2006a, 2006b, 2009). Yet among these agencies, only 27% inspected dealers on a regular basis, and only 16% regularly investigated dealers suspected of making illegal sales (though the latter may reflect low levels of problems with illegal sales by gun dealers).

Finally, only about a third of the agencies received data from federal or state systems on prospective or actual gun buyers who fail background checks.⁷ Slightly less than half (45%) of the agencies that received such information followed up on these cases regularly, though most of the remainder did so occasionally.

Use of Gun Enforcement and Gun Violence Prevention Strategies

More than half of the agencies (57%) operated a special unit devoted to gun enforcement operations. Functions performed by these units included: directed patrol focused on areas of high gun crime (35%); surveillance/investigation of known gun offenders and other high-risk groups (38%); investigation of gun trafficking (35%); monitoring gun dealers (20%); and working with federal and/or state agencies on gun crime problems (51%).

The responding agencies were also asked about the use and perceived effectiveness of 41 gun enforcement and gun violence prevention strategies. Below, the strategies are grouped into those emphasizing gun removal/disposal, gun trafficking, illegal possession and carrying, prevention and outreach, high-risk groups, comprehensive approaches, and gun safety.⁸ As shown in Table 4, agencies were asked to report the frequency with which they used these strategies on a three-point scale: never, occasionally, or frequently/regularly.

Removing Guns from the Community. Agencies did not report extensive use of gun acquisition strategies such as gun buyback programs. Nearly two-thirds of the agencies (61%) did not use gun buybacks, and most (55%) also reported not having other programs for voluntary

⁷ In some states, local police have responsibility for conducting background checks on prospective gun buyers (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006). In other states, local police would need to obtain data on denied gun sales from federal and/or state authorities.

⁸ Project staff compiled this list based on extensive review of research reports and other literature describing or evaluating strategies to reduced gun crime (e.g., see IACP 2008; National Research Council 2005; OJJDP 1999; Sherman and Eck 2002).

gun disposal. Although the utility of gun buyback programs is questionable (see earlier discussion), experts do recommend that police establish protocols for voluntary surrender of firearms (IACP 2008).

Reducing Gun Trafficking. To address gun trafficking, police commonly trace recovered guns and check them for ballistic matches, as discussed above. Other common strategies included debriefing offenders (adult and juvenile) about their gun sources (used frequently by 64% of agencies and occasionally by 29%), conducting investigations with ATF (and, to a lesser extent, with other state and local agencies) (used frequently by 46% and occasionally by 47%), and investigating gun thefts (used frequently by 39% and occasionally by 53%). Agencies reported more modest use of several other anti-gun trafficking strategies. Relatively few agencies (19%), for example, reported frequent investigation of unlawful gun sales or sources of recovered guns (including retail and street sources), though most agencies reported at least occasional efforts along these lines. Most agencies did not monitor denied gun sales (65%), monitor gun shows (64%), or undertake educational or cooperative efforts with gun dealers (70%). However, the latter two activities may have had limited relevance to many agencies depending on the number of gun shows and gun dealers in their jurisdiction.

Table 4: Use of Gun Violence Reduction Strategies (Percentages using the strategies frequently/regularly, occasionally, or never)	Frequently/ Regularly	Occasionally	Never
<i>Gun Removal/Disposal</i>			
Gun buyback program (n=163)	3	36	61
Programs or procedures (other than gun buyback) for voluntary disposal (n=159)	8	37	55
<i>Gun Trafficking</i>			
Trace Recovered firearms (n=162)	74	25	1
Check recovered firearms for ballistics matches (n=159)	66	30	4
Investigate retail sources of gun crimes (n=161)	12	46	42
Investigate straw purchasing and unlawful transfers (n=163)	20	43	37
Monitor gun shows for illegal buyers and sales (n=159)	8	28	64
Debrief adult gun offenders about their gun sources (n=162)	58	35	7
Debrief juvenile gun offenders about their gun sources (n=163)	64	29	7
Local investigations with ATF (n=164)	46	47	7
Multi-jurisdictional investigations with other local, state, federal agencies (n=164)	27	53	20
Investigate and undercover operations to suppress unlawful street sales of firearms (n=163)	19	55	26
In-depth investigations of gun thefts (n=163)	39	53	8
Educational or cooperative efforts with dealers (n=164)	7	23	70
Monitor denied gun sales (n=164)	11	24	65
Link ATF data on multiple sales to crime gun information (n=163)	22	33	45
<i>Illegal Gun Possession and Carrying</i>			
Directed patrols or specialized units emphasizing gun detection in hot spots (n=164)	43	30	27
Checkpoints for unlawful possession of guns in vehicles (n=164)	4	7	89
Hotlines or reward programs for tips on illegal gun possession, carrying, use (n=164)	41	35	24
Consent searches at homes of juveniles thought to illegal possess guns (n=164)	15	64	21
Shot spotter listening devices (n=161)	9	5	86
<i>Prevention and Outreach</i>			
Neighborhood meetings specially on the issue of gun crimes (n=162)	15	53	32
Media/public education campaigns (n=162)	8	56	36
Letters/information to gun buyers about pertinent laws (n=163)	1	11	88
Gun safety education in schools (n=162)	10	41	49
Violence prevention programs targeting youths in schools (n=163)	30	55	15
<i>Targeting High Risk Groups</i>			
Focusing on gangs (n=163)	71	23	6
Shooting response protocol stressing prevention of retaliation (n=163)	36	33	31
Work with street/gang outreach workers (n=163)	23	40	37
Targeting known gun offenders through investigation, surveillance, warrants (n=163)	49	45	6
Enhanced monitoring of high-risk probationers and parolees (n=160)	39	37	24
Joint ATF initiatives to target offenders and hot spots such as Violent Crime Impact Teams (n=160)	41	32	27
Joint initiatives with state/local prosecutors to prioritize gun offenders (n=164)	38	42	20
Submit information on felons with guns to U.S. Attorney's Office (n=164)	55	35	10
Remove guns from scenes of domestic violence calls (n=161)	72	27	1
Check on gun ownership by people under restraining orders (n=161)	25	40	35
Cross-jurisdictional and information sharing efforts to track violent offenders (n=162)	47	42	11
Notification meetings (n=159)	14	30	56
<i>Comprehensive Approaches</i>			
Multi-agency and community partnerships to address enforcement, prosecution, and	64	20	16

prevention, such as Project Safe Neighborhoods (n=163)			
<i>Gun Safety</i>			
Distribution of gun storage or safety devices (n=163)	20	61	19
Education campaigns to inform gun owners about safe storage (n=163)	8	60	32

Based on a survey of 164 urban police agencies. Unless otherwise noted, missing data rates were negligible.

Deterring Illegal Gun Possession and Carrying. Strategies most commonly used by police to target illegal gun possession and carrying included directed patrols or specialized units focusing on gun crime hot spots and hotlines or reward programs for tips on guns. Nearly half of the agencies made frequent use of these strategies, and about three-quarters used them at least occasionally. Most agencies (79%) conducted occasional consent searches at the homes of juveniles thought to be in possession of weapons (e.g., see Decker and Rosenfeld 2004), but few (15%) did so regularly. Few agencies (11-14%) reported any use of roadblock checkpoints for weapons or shot spotter listening devices.

Prevention and Outreach. Agencies reported modest utilization of prevention and outreach strategies as methods for reducing gun crime. Although most agencies made at least occasional use of most of the listed strategies, few used them regularly. Almost one-third reported frequent use of youth violence prevention programs in schools. However, no more than 15% reported regular use of a number of additional strategies focused on education and awareness. These included general efforts to raise public awareness about gun violence as well as more targeted efforts to teach gun safety in schools and to educate gun buyers about pertinent laws regarding firearm uses and transfers (e.g., see Ridgeway et al. 2011).

Targeting High-Risk Groups. Police made frequent use of strategies targeting high-risk groups as a way to reduce gun violence. Half of more of the agencies reported regular use of strategies to target and/or disarm gangs (71%), known gun offenders (49%), and domestic violence offenders (72%). Likewise, most (55%) frequently submitted gun cases to the U.S.

Attorney's Office for federal prosecution. Strategies used by a majority of agencies but with less frequency included targeting offenders and hot spots with ATF (used frequently by 41%), shooting response protocols (used frequently by 36%), working with gang outreach workers (used frequently by 23%), enhanced monitoring of probationers and parolees (used frequently by 39%), working with state prosecutors to prioritize gun offenders (used frequently by 38%), and removing guns from persons under restraining orders (used frequently by 25%). In contrast, more than half of the agencies (56%) did not use notification meetings with high-risk groups (see the earlier discussion of the pulling levers strategy), and only 14% used them regularly.⁹

Comprehensive Approaches. Most agencies reported involvement in multi-agency partnerships to address enforcement, prosecution, and prevention approaches to gun violence. These include federally-sponsored efforts such as Project Safe Neighborhoods and Weed and Seed, as well as locally-initiated efforts. Approximately two-thirds of agencies (64%) reported regular participation in these efforts, and 84% reported at least occasional participation.

Promoting Gun Safety. Finally, most agencies engaged in some efforts to promote gun safety, including the distribution of gun storage and gun safety devices and participation in public education efforts. However, no more than 20% of agencies engaged in these efforts regularly (similarly, see the response on school-based gun safety education listed in the section on prevention and outreach).

⁹ Notification meetings entail face-to-face meetings between high-risk groups (i.e., gangs, probationers, and/or parolees) and a variety of criminal justice and community representatives, including local and federal law enforcement and prosecutors, other criminal justice officials (e.g., probation and parole authorities), social service providers, and community members. In these meetings, practitioners seek to: promise a coordinated and aggressive law enforcement response to gun violence; make offenders more visible to law enforcement and the community, thus reducing offenders' sense of anonymity; and offer support services such as employment assistance and substance abuse treatment (e.g., see McDevitt et al., 2006). Available accounts suggest that these meetings are typically conducted in cooperation with U.S. Attorneys through the Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) program or similar efforts. As shown below, most agencies reported involvement in multi-agency initiatives like PSN, but these agencies may not have all taken active part in notification meetings run by U.S. Attorneys. It is also possible, however, that some respondents did not make the connection between PSN and notification meetings when answering the survey.

In sum, the survey results show that urban police agencies use a wide variety of strategies to address gun crime. However, there are relatively few strategies that are used on a regular or frequent basis by the majority of big city police agencies. As shown in Table 5, which displays the strategies that agencies were most likely to employ frequently or regularly, only 8 were used on such a basis by most respondents. This suggests that strategies to reduce gun violence may be somewhat underutilized or underdeveloped relative to the seriousness of the problem. In other words, there may be considerable room for police to expand on these efforts.

Table 5: Top 10 Strategies Most Likely to be Used Frequently/Regularly (Percentages of agencies using these strategies frequently/regularly, occasionally, or never)	Frequently/ Regularly	Occasionally	Never
1. Trace Recovered firearms	74	25	1
2. Remove guns from scenes of domestic violence calls	72	27	1
3. Focusing on gangs	71	23	6
4. Check recovered firearms for ballistics matches	66	30	4
5. Multi-agency and community partnerships to address enforcement, prosecution, and prevention, such as Project Safe Neighborhoods	64	20	16
6. Debriefing juvenile gun offenders about their gun sources	64	20	16
7. Debrief adult gun offenders about their gun sources	58	35	7
8. Submit information on felons with guns to U.S. Attorney's Office	55	35	10
9. Targeting known gun offenders through investigation, surveillance, warrants	49	45	6
10. Cross-jurisdictional and information sharing efforts to track violent offenders	47	42	11

Based on a survey of 164 urban police agencies. Unless otherwise noted, missing data rates were negligible.

Factors Involved in Strategy Utilization

Several factors could affect the degree to which agencies utilize the various gun violence strategies discussed above, including local gun crime problems, resource constraints, policy decisions, state and local gun laws, and the perceived effectiveness of strategies. For example, nearly half of the strategies were used more frequently in jurisdictions with higher levels of gun crime (analyses not shown).

Gun laws also had some impact on the use of these strategies. Most notably, agencies with the authority to inspect licensed dealers used many of the strategies more frequently,

including several oriented towards gun markets and gun trafficking—investigation of straw purchasing, investigation of retail and street sources of crime guns, working with licensed gun dealers, and linking information on recovered guns to ATF data on multiple sales (i.e., purchases of multiple guns by the same individual from the same dealer at one time or in a short span of days).¹⁰ Other gun laws, in contrast, were not as strongly related to the practices reported by the agencies. For example, agencies with access to gun registration systems were more likely to debrief offenders about their gun sources and check on firearms possession by persons under restraining orders. However, they were no more likely than other agencies to investigate straw purchasing or retail sources of crime guns, both of which can be facilitated by the availability of gun registration data. Similarly, agencies in jurisdictions regulating private sales were no more likely to investigate straw purchasing and other illegal gun transfers. These findings are consistent with those discussed earlier on the limits to local enforcement of gun laws.

The degree to which police utilize these strategies may also depend in part on their perceptions of the strategies' effectiveness, as determined through direct and/or vicarious experience. The section below examines police perceptions of the effectiveness of these strategies as reported by agencies that utilized them.

Perceived Effectiveness of Gun Enforcement and Gun Violence Prevention Strategies

Agencies were asked to rate the effectiveness of strategies they used on a three-point scale ranging from little or no effectiveness to moderate effectiveness to very effective. For each strategy, Table 6 shows the percentage of agencies using the strategy at least occasionally and the strategy's effectiveness as rated by those agencies. (Note that the effectiveness ratings for

¹⁰ Federal regulations require licensed dealers to notify ATF whenever they sell multiple handguns to any one individual within five consecutive business days (ATF 1995). These transactions, referred to as multiple sales, are considered to be a potential indicator of gun trafficking (e.g., see ATF 2000; Koper 2005, 2007).

some strategies may reflect their usefulness in solving particular cases as well as their effectiveness in reducing gun crime more generally.¹¹⁾

With the exception of gun removal strategies (which were rated as ineffective by 67% to 72% of users), the strategies were rated as moderately or very effective by the majority of agencies. In most cases, a plurality or majority of agencies rated the strategy as moderately effective. Two strategies that were rated very effective by the majority of users were submitting cases to the U.S. Attorney for prosecution (rated as very effective by 60%) and removing guns from the scenes of domestic violence calls (rated as very effective by 56%). Several other strategies targeting high-risk groups, such as those focusing on known gun offenders, gangs, probationers, and parolees, were also rated as very effective by nearly half of the agencies and as at least moderately effective by nearly all. Agencies gave similarly high effectiveness ratings to directed patrols / specialized units focused on gun crime hot spots, local gun trafficking investigations with ATF, and multi-agency community partnerships.

¹¹ The ratings focus on agencies with reported experience using the strategies. A caveat, however, is that agencies not using the strategies may be more likely to consider them ineffective.

Table 6. Perceived Effectiveness of Gun Violence Prevention Strategies (Percentages using the strategies and percentages of users rating them as very effective, moderately effective, or not effective)	% Used	Very Effective	Moderate Effectiveness	Little or no Effectiveness
<i>Gun Removal/Disposal</i>				
Gun buyback program	39	9	24	67
Programs or procedures (other than gun buyback) for voluntary disposal	45	2	26	72
<i>Gun Trafficking</i>				
Trace Recovered firearms	99	22	59	19
Check recovered firearms for ballistics matches	96	39	46	15
Investigate retail sources of gun crimes	58	10	56	34
Investigate straw purchasing and unlawful transfers	63	20	52	28
Monitor gun shows for illegal buyers and sales	36	6	67	27
Debrief adult gun offenders about their gun sources	93	16	49	35
Debrief juvenile gun offenders about their gun sources	93	14	55	31
Local investigations with ATF	93	47	44	9
Multi-jurisdictional investigations with other local, state, federal agencies	80	37	52	11
Investigate and undercover operations to suppress unlawful street sales of firearms	74	25	65	10
In-depth investigations of gun thefts	92	16	67	17
Educational or cooperative efforts with dealers	30	17	65	17
Monitor denied gun sales	35	15	49	36
Link ATF data on multiple sales to crime gun information	55	19	64	17
<i>Illegal Gun Possession and Carrying</i>				
Directed patrols or specialized units emphasizing gun detection in hot spots	73	46	44	10
Checkpoints for unlawful possession of guns in vehicles	11	22	61	17
Hotlines or reward programs for tips on illegal gun possession, carrying, use	76	11	50	39
Consent searches at homes of juveniles thought to illegal possess guns	79	21	58	21
Shot spotter listening devices	14	17	55	28
<i>Prevention and Outreach</i>				
Neighborhood meetings specially on the issue of gun crimes	68	8	58	34
Media/public education campaigns	64	9	59	32
Letters/information to gun buyers about pertinent laws	12	15	39	46
Gun safety education in schools	51	11	76	13
Violence prevention programs targeting youths in schools	85	16	71	13
<i>Targeting High Risk Groups</i>				
Focusing on gangs	94	42	60	6
Shooting response protocol stressing prevention of retaliation	69	37	59	4
Work with street/gang outreach workers	63	20	60	20
Targeting known gun offenders through investigation, surveillance, warrants	94	45	48	7
Enhanced monitoring of high-risk probationers and parolees	76	47	43	10
Joint ATF initiatives to target offenders and hot spots such as Violent Crime Impact Teams	73	45	47	8
Joint initiatives with state/local prosecutors to prioritize gun offenders	80	44	51	5
Submit information on felons with guns to U.S. Attorney's Office	90	60	34	6
Remove guns from scenes of domestic violence calls	99	56	37	7
Check on gun ownership by people under restraining orders	65	34	51	15
Cross-jurisdictional and information sharing efforts to track violent offenders	89	37	58	5
Notification meetings	44	18	68	14
<i>Comprehensive Approaches</i>				
Multi-agency and community partnerships to address enforcement, prosecution, and	84	49	47	4

prevention, such as Project Safe Neighborhoods				
<i>Gun Safety</i>				
Distribution of gun storage or safety devices	81	24	44	32
Education campaigns to inform gun owners about safe storage	68	20	60	28

Based on a survey of 164 urban police agencies. Unless otherwise noted, missing data rates were negligible.

Table 7 presents the strategies that agencies were most likely to use frequently and rate as very effective. Each of the 12 strategies highlighted was used frequently and rated as very effective by at least 20% of respondents across the entire sample. Submitting cases to the U.S. Attorney’s Office for prosecution was the leading strategy, with 39% of agencies using it frequently and rating it as very effective. Other common and highly rated strategies involving cooperation with federal authorities included participation in multi-agency initiatives like Project Safe Neighborhoods and working with ATF on gun trafficking investigations and targeted enforcement initiatives (e.g., the Violent Crime Impact Team program—see Chipman and Pappas 2006). Other strategies in this top list included efforts focused on high-risk groups (e.g., gangs), places (i.e., gun crime hot spots), and situations (e.g., domestic violence incidents). Further, local police put substantial emphasis on collaborative efforts with other federal, state, and local criminal justice agencies.

Table 7: Strategies Most Likely to Be Used Frequently and Rated Very Effective

Strategy	Percent of Respondents
Submit information on felons with guns to the U.S. Attorney's Office for prosecution	39
Remove guns from scenes of domestic violence calls	37
Multi-agency and community partnerships to address enforcement, prosecution, and prevention (e.g., Project Safe Neighborhoods or Weed and Seed)	34
Focusing on gangs (prevention programs, suppression activities, etc.)	32
Check recovered firearms for ballistic matches	29
Directed patrols or specialized units emphasizing gun detection in gun crime hot spots	29
Targeting known gun offenders through investigation, surveillance, and warrants	29
Local gun trafficking investigations with ATF	27
Enhanced monitoring of high-risk probationers and parolees	24
Joint initiatives with ATF to target gun offenders and hot spots (e.g., Violent Crime Impact Teams)	24
Joint initiatives with state/local prosecutors to prioritize gun offenders	23
Cross-jurisdictional and information sharing efforts to track violent offenders and groups	21

Based on a survey of 164 urban police agencies. Unless otherwise noted, missing data rates were negligible.

The most highly used and effective strategies were very comparable between cities with high and low levels of gun crime based on a comparison of cities above and below the median rate of gun crime (analyses not shown).¹² Top strategies were also similar irrespective of the level of gun control in a jurisdiction. To illustrate, jurisdictions having both gun registration and regulation of private sales reported top strategies very similar to those in Table 7.¹³ There was some tendency, however, for police in these jurisdictions to put more emphasis on gun tracing and checks on gun ownership among people with restraining orders.¹⁴ This likely reflects the

¹² Note, however, that police use the strategies more frequently in jurisdictions with high levels of gun crime.

¹³ These particular gun control measures were chosen for this comparison because their combination would seem to provide police with some of the most effective tools for identifying patterns of illegal gun trafficking.

¹⁴ Gun tracing and checks on persons with restraining orders were ranked 10th and 11th in places with gun registration and regulation of private sales and ranked 15th and 18th in other jurisdictions.

ability of police to do more with these tools in places where police can more readily link a firearm and its chain of custody to particular individuals.

Assessing Overall Police Efforts and Their Impacts

Table 8 presents three measures of a police agency's overall effort level in targeting firearms: gun recoveries per gun crime, weapons arrests per gun crime, and gun enforcement/prevention strategies used regularly (as reported in the survey) per gun crime.¹⁵ These measures provide a method of standardizing for population size and levels of gun availability and gun violence when making comparisons across jurisdictions. The logic is that agencies making greater proactive efforts to target guns will recover greater numbers of guns, make more weapons arrests, and use more gun violence reduction strategies relative to their level of gun crime. Similar measures have also been used by others to examine variation in firearms enforcement efforts across agencies and over time (Brill 1977; Sherman 2000).

As shown in Table 8, for every 100 gun crimes, agencies on average recovered 154 guns, made 80 weapons arrests, and used 5 strategies to reduce gun crime. There was considerable variation, however, in the agencies' effort levels. The bottom 25 percent, at most, made 31 arrests, recovered 62 firearms, and utilized 1 strategy per 100 gun crimes, while the top 25 percent made at least 93 arrests, recovered 174 guns, and utilized 5 strategies per 100 gun crimes. The three effort measures are also related in that agencies scoring higher on one also tended to score highly on the others.¹⁶

¹⁵ For the latter index, the strategies were summed regardless of their perceived effectiveness.

¹⁶ On a 0 to 1 scale, the correlations between the measures ranged from 0.36 to .57.

Table 8: Effort Levels in Gun Enforcement and Gun Violence Prevention Strategies

	Weapons Arrests per 100 Gun Crimes (1)	Weapon Recoveries per 100 Gun Crimes (2)	Number of Strategies per 100 Gun Crimes (3)
Average	80	154	5
Percentiles 25 th	31	62	1
Median	50	106	3
75 th	93	174	5

Note: The number of agencies with available data for each calculation was as follows: (1) N = 136; (2) N = 135; (3) N = 147.

Generally, an agency's effort levels were not related to the jurisdiction's gun laws or the availability of firearms in the state.¹⁷ (Hence, police in jurisdictions with stricter gun laws do not necessarily put greater effort into weapons enforcement or achieve more substantial results.)

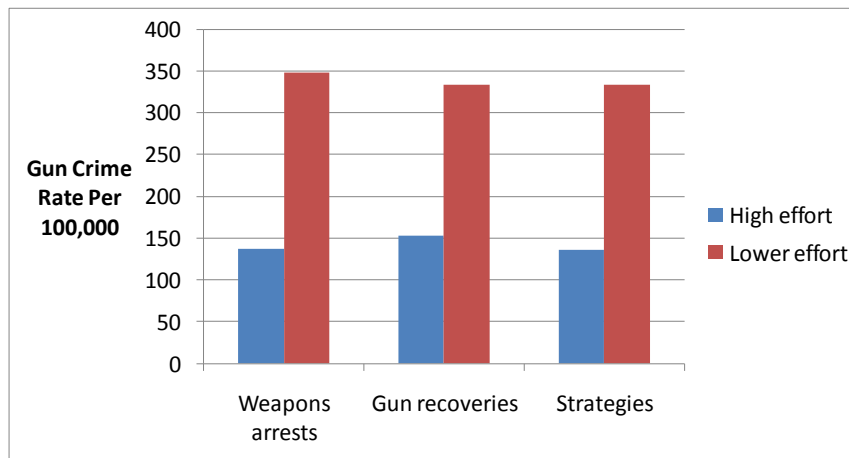
One exception was that police tended to make more weapons arrests per gun crime in jurisdictions with more restrictive gun carrying laws. To a substantial degree, these ratios may reflect both the agency's emphasis on guns and its overall emphasis on proactive policing activities (e.g., its use traffic stops, pedestrian checks, etc.) that can lead to more gun detection. Additional study of the variation in these effort levels, and the organizational and environmental factors that facilitate or hinder gun violence prevention efforts, would be useful.

Figure 1 compares rates of violent gun crime between jurisdictions where police agencies scored in the top 50% on the effort measures and jurisdictions where the police scored in the bottom 50%. For each measure, gun crime rates in the low effort jurisdictions were more than twice their levels in the high effort jurisdictions. Put another way, gun crime rates were 54% to 61% lower in the high effort jurisdictions. Similarly, as shown in Figure 2, the percentage of

¹⁷ The latter was approximated using the percentage of suicides committed with guns as measured at the state level. This measure is commonly used in research studies as an indicator of gun availability.

violent crimes committed with guns was around 25% in the high effort jurisdictions and around 36% in the low effort jurisdictions. Thus, the share of violent crimes involving guns was 25% to 33% lower (in relative terms) in the high effort jurisdictions. These patterns were consistent for larger and smaller cities (based on a comparison of cities with populations above and below 250,000) and in jurisdictions with stronger and weaker gun controls (based on a comparison of cities with and without gun registration and regulation of private sales).

Figure 1: Rates of gun crime are lower in cities that put higher effort into weapons enforcement

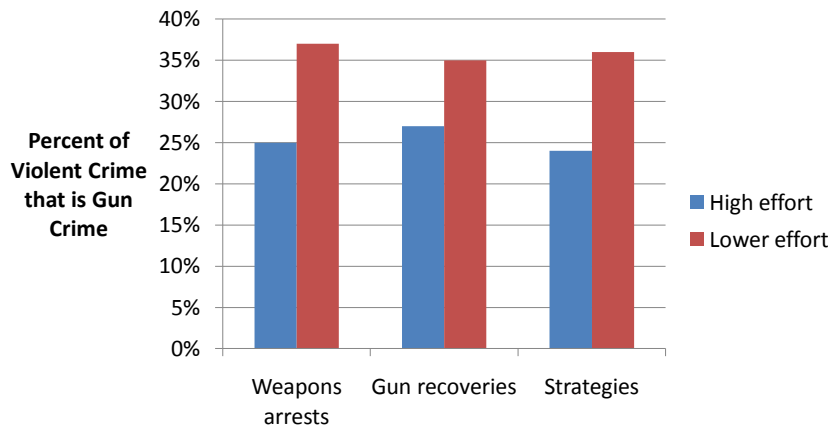


High effort=top 50% on weapons arrests, gun recoveries, and gun violence reduction strategies used per gun crime

These patterns suggest that a greater emphasis on guns by police is associated with lower gun crime. However, they should be interpreted with caution. In places with less severe crime problems, for instance, police may have more time to utilize proactive strategies that lead to more gun recoveries and weapons arrests, and thus higher effort ratios. If so, this would tend to overstate the impact of police efforts on gun crime. On the other hand, police could also be expected to put a greater emphasis on strategies targeting gun crime in places where gun violence is more prevalent. This tendency would lead to higher effort ratios in places with more

gun crime and potentially mask some of the impact of police activity. To some degree, these patterns might also reflect the workings of other social factors that affect both police activities and gun crime. Nevertheless, the data provide intriguing indications of the potential for police to reduce gun crime through enhanced gun enforcement and gun violence prevention efforts.

Figure 2: The share of violent crimes committed with guns is lower in cities that put higher effort into weapons enforcement



High effort=top 50% on weapons arrests, gun recoveries, and gun violence reduction strategies used per gun crime

Discussion and Conclusions

Police in large cities engage in a wide array of enforcement and prevention efforts to reduce gun crime. Targeted policing efforts focused on high-risk places and groups—such as gun detection in hot spots and targeting of violent gangs—are the most frequently used and effective strategies, particularly when conducted in the context of multi-agency, comprehensive strategies. Removing guns from the scenes of domestic violence incidents is also widely used and viewed as effective by participating agencies. Ballistics matching technology is enhancing

the ability of police to solve gun crimes, and investigation of gun trafficking with ATF, facilitated by gun tracing, is the most frequently used and effective supply-side strategy for disrupting illegal gun markets. These practices, which are largely consistent with research evidence and expert opinion, should be given strong consideration in policy and funding decisions.

At the same time, the survey findings suggest that police efforts to reduce gun crime can be enhanced considerably. Many evidence-based and promising strategies for reducing gun violence, including directed patrols in gun crime hot spots, enhanced monitoring of probationers and parolees, and use of shooting response protocols, are not used on a regular basis by a majority of urban police agencies. Other innovative approaches, such as consent searches at the homes of at-risk juveniles and notification meetings with high-risk groups, receive relatively little use. With some exceptions, local police efforts focused on gun trafficking, prevention and outreach, and gun safety also appear to be underdeveloped. The need for these strategies is, of course, greater in places with more gun crime. Care should also be taken in recommending these strategies because some have not been carefully evaluated. Yet given the seriousness and costliness of gun violence, these efforts should be given high priority by law enforcement, particularly in urban areas. Further, the strategies examined in this study were usually considered to be at least moderately effective by agencies using them. At a minimum, further experimentation with them would thus seem beneficial.

Similarly, there are substantial gaps in the enforcement of many gun laws. Agencies operating in states and localities with gun registration, regulation of private sales, theft / loss reporting requirements, and regulation of licensed gun dealers engage in limited efforts to enforce or use these laws, despite their potential to enhance law enforcement efforts directed at

disrupting illegal gun markets. In some of these jurisdictions, state police agencies may take the primary role in enforcing these laws. Nonetheless, heavier involvement by local police agencies could perhaps improve the rigor, comprehensiveness, and effectiveness of supply side efforts. Resource limitations appear to be a significant impediment to better enforcement of gun laws for many police agencies. Others may include weak or vaguely worded laws that make investigation and prosecution of illegal sales difficult or a lack of significant penalties for violations like straw purchasing. Policy changes, including a reprioritization of gun enforcement efforts and better cooperative and data sharing arrangements among local, state, and federal agencies, may also be necessary to facilitate these efforts. These issues warrant greater attention.¹⁸ Law enforcement practitioners as well as gun industry representatives agree, for example, on the need for a greater emphasis on the investigation, prosecution, and punishment of straw purchasing (PERF 2010).

The findings also show that local police agencies depend heavily on cooperation with federal authorities in their efforts to reduce gun crime. Submitting cases to the U.S. Attorney for prosecution was the leading strategy identified by local agencies for addressing gun crime. Local police also emphasize cooperation with federal authorities in multi-agency programs like Project Safe Neighborhoods and Weed and Seed, and they rely heavily on collaboration with ATF for gun trafficking investigations and some targeted enforcement efforts. Furthermore, in many jurisdictions, ATF is the primary or only agency that regulates licensed gun dealers. Accordingly, federal policymakers should continue to support and strengthen these cooperative efforts. Because ATF resources are stretched thin (ATF has only about 600 inspectors, for example, to monitor more than 100,000 gun dealers nationwide), local police should consider devoting more officers to ATF task forces. ATF can deputize officers participating in these task

¹⁸ Weaknesses in the implementation and enforcement of gun laws also have important implications for efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of those laws.

forces to give them federal authority in conducting gun enforcement operations. This could bolster strategically targeted operations to disrupt illicit gun markets, for example.

The reliance of local police on federal prosecution of gun offenders also reflects the general laxity with which many gun offenses are treated at the state level. A problem commonly cited by police officials is that state-level penalties are slight for offenses like illegal gun possession, illegal gun carrying, and even illegal gun sales (e.g., straw purchasing) (PERF 2010). Further, gun charges are often dismissed in plea bargaining arrangements. Penalties for gun violations are often much more severe in the federal system, and the threat of federal prosecution is a key element of successful gun violence reduction programs like Project Safe Neighborhoods. In comments provided with the PERF survey, police frequently cited the need for tougher punishment for gun offenses including illegal possession and carrying, and some agencies reported that recent changes to this effect in their state or local laws had improved their ability to reduce gun crime. Offenders and victims involved in serious gun violence often have long criminal histories, including prior weapons violations. All of this suggests that state legislators, judges, and prosecutors should treat gun violations of all sorts with greater priority and severity. Cooperation between police and state prosecutors to prioritize gun offenders is a helpful step in this regard and one that police often rated as highly effective.

To conclude, police are using a wide variety of strategies to reduce gun violence, and there are many that they find to be effective. These efforts could be intensified and strengthened in various ways that could further enhance the effectiveness of police in suppressing gun crime. However, the success of these efforts will also be tied to the resources and emphasis given to gun crime by other local, state, and federal officials.