

UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING GANG VIOLENCE: PROBLEM ANALYSIS AND RESPONSE DEVELOPMENT IN LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS

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Gang violence presents a major challenge to police departments in the United States. Problem-oriented policing has been suggested as a promising way to understand and prevent complex gang violence problems. Unfortunately, problem analysis, as currently practiced, is generally weak and the resulting responses usually consist of mostly traditional enforcement tactics. Academic-police partnerships can be very productive in understanding and responding to serious crime problems. Unfortunately, such collaborations are rare. The U.S. Department of Justice-sponsored Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative provides an important opportunity to facilitate academic-police partnerships. In Lowell, Massachusetts, academics and practitioners collaborated on a problem analysis that shed important light on the nature of gang violence and led to the implementation of problem-oriented responses that have been promising in preventing gang violence.

Keywords: *gang violence; Asian gangs; problem-oriented policing; problem analysis*

Conflicts between street gangs have long been noted to fuel much of the violence in U.S. cities. City-level studies have found gang-related motives

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in more than one third of homicides in Chicago (Block & Block, 1993), 50% of the homicides in Los Angeles' Hollenbeck area (Tita, Riley, & Greenwood, 2003), and 60% of youth homicide in Boston (Kennedy, Piehl, & Braga, 1996). Firearms are usually the weapons of choice in urban gang violence problems (Klein, 1995). Dealing with gangs and gang-related violence is a challenge for most police departments in the United States. In 2001, all law enforcement agencies serving jurisdictions with populations of 250,000 and higher and 85% of those serving a population between 100,000 and 249,999 reported gang problems (National Youth Gang Center, 2002). Problem-oriented policing has been suggested as a promising way to prevent gang violence (Decker, 2002; Huff, 2002). Although there are important parallels in gang activity across cities, such as the small participation of all city youth in gangs (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993) and the expressive nature of much gang violence (Decker, 1996), the character of criminal and disorderly youth gangs and groups varies widely both within and across cities (Curry, Ball, & Fox, 1994). The problem-oriented approach facilitates understanding of local gangs and associated gang violence so that responses can be logically linked to the nature of the problem. As Scott Decker (2003) has suggested, one of the crucial factors in responding to gangs is how the problem is understood.

Unfortunately, research has demonstrated that problem analysis is usually shallow. Police officers often conduct only a superficial analysis of problems and then rush to implement responses (Cordner, 1998). Shallow problem analysis results in a tendency for police officers to rely on traditional or faddish responses rather than conducting a wider search for creative responses (Cordner, 1998). Although there are many avenues through which the problem analysis and response development phases of the problem-oriented policing process can be improved, police partnerships with academic researchers can be very helpful in advancing problem analysis in police departments. The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ)-sponsored Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) initiative provides an important opportunity for police departments to understand and respond to gang violence problems. PSN is an attempt to reduce gun crime by networking existing

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local programs that target gun crime and providing those programs with additional tools necessary to be successful (www.psn.gov). DOJ funding is being used to hire new federal and state prosecutors, support investigators, provide training, and develop and promote community outreach efforts. A key element of PSN is the strategic analysis of data to better frame gun violence problems and to logically link prevention strategies to the nature of the problems they seek to address. To support these collaborations, PSN provides each of the 94 U.S. Attorney's Districts in the United States with funds to hire academic research partners to help understand and address serious gun violence problems in local jurisdictions.

The city of Lowell is 1 of 11 target cities in the U.S. Attorney's District of Massachusetts selected for PSN attention. Researchers from Harvard University and Northeastern University worked closely with criminal justice practitioners in Lowell to assess the nature of the city's homicide and serious nonfatal gun violence problem. This article presents the methods and results of problem analysis research and the set of interventions that were developed based on the analysis. The research finds that homicide and serious gun violence is highly concentrated among a small number of gang-involved, highly active youth offenders. An interagency criminal justice working group, with support and involvement from social services and the community, was developed to focus prevention, intervention, and enforcement resources on this risky group of individuals responsible for the bulk of Lowell violence. A new understanding of the dynamics of Asian gangs was particularly important in developing an innovative strategy in dealing with Asian gang violence that has shown some promising initial results.

PROBLEM-ORIENTED POLICING AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Problem-oriented policing holds great promise for creating a strong local response to gang violence problems. Problem-oriented policing works to identify why things are going wrong and to frame responses using a wide variety of often-untraditional approaches (Goldstein, 1979). Using a basic iterative approach of problem identification, analysis, response, assessment, and adjustment of the response, problem-oriented policing has been effective against a wide variety of crime, fear, and order concerns (Braga, 2002; Eck & Spelman, 1987; Goldstein, 1990). This adaptable and dynamic analytic approach provides an appropriate framework to uncover the complex mechanisms at play in gang violence and to develop tailor-made inter-

ventions to reduce gang-related victimization. The National Academy of Sciences' Panel on the Understanding and Control of Violent Behavior observed that sustained research on problem-oriented initiatives that modify places, routine activities, and situations that promote violence could contribute much to the understanding and control of violence (Reiss & Roth, 1993). Recent research has found problem-oriented policing to be effective in controlling violence in hot spot areas (Braga et al., 1999) and in reducing the prevalence of homicide (White, Fyfe, Campbell, & Goldkamp, 2003).

A number of jurisdictions have been experimenting with new problem-oriented frameworks to prevent gang- and group-involved violence. These new strategic approaches have shown promising results in the reduction of violence (Braga, Kennedy, & Tita, 2002; Braga, Kennedy, Waring, & Piehl, 2001; McGarrell & Chermak, 2003). Pioneered in Boston, these new initiatives have followed a core set of activities to reduce violence. These activities have included the "pulling levers" focused deterrence strategy, designed to prevent violence by and among chronic offenders and groups of chronic offenders; the convening of an interagency working group representing a wide range of criminal justice and social service capabilities; and jurisdiction-specific assessments of violence dynamics and perpetrator and victim characteristics. All these initiatives have been facilitated by a close, more or less real-time partnership between researchers and practitioners. Solid problem analyses are the foundations on which the interventions implemented by the interagency collaborations are built.

PROBLEMS WITH PROBLEM ANALYSIS AND THE PROSPECTS OF POLICE-ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS

Problem analysis is the process of conducting in-depth, systematic analysis and assessment of crime problems at the local level (Goldstein, 1990). The role of problem analysis in problem-oriented policing is vital because it involves the in-depth examination of underlying factors that lead to crime and disorder problems, for which effective responses can be developed and through which assessment can be conducted to determine the relevance and success of the responses. Problem analysis is action-oriented research that not only supports police interventions but also drives them. Unfortunately, as Boba (2003) observed, although problem-oriented policing has blossomed in both concept and practice, problem analysis has been the slowest part of the process to develop. In his 20-year review of problem-oriented

policing, Michael Scott (2000) concluded that problem analysis remains the aspect of problem-oriented policing that is most in need of improvement. The Police Executive Research Forum's (PERF) national assessment of the U.S. Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS)-sponsored "Problem Solving Partnerships" program also found that problem analysis was the weakest phase of the problem-oriented policing process (PERF, 2000).

Bynum (2001) suggested that police are generally good at identifying problems but have difficulty clearly defining problems, properly using data sources, conducting comprehensive analyses, and implementing analysis-driven responses. Some officers skip the analysis phase or conduct an overly simple analysis that does not adequately dissect the problem or does not use relevant information from other agencies (such as hospitals, schools, and private businesses) (Clarke, 1998). Based on his extensive experience with police departments implementing problem-oriented policing, Eck (2000) suggested that much problem analysis consists of a simple examination of police data coupled with the officer's working experience with the problem. In their analysis of problem-oriented initiatives in 43 police departments in England and Wales, Read and Tilley (2000) found that problem analysis was generally weak, with many initiatives accepting the definition of a problem at face value, using only short-term data to unravel the nature of the problem, and failing to adequately examine the genesis of the crime problems. As a result, the responses of many problem-oriented policing projects rely too much on traditional police tactics (such as arrests, surveillance, and crackdowns) and neglect the wider range of available alternative responses. Read and Tilley found that officers selected certain responses prior to, or in spite of, analysis; failed to think through the need for a sustained crime reduction; failed to think through the mechanisms by which the response could have a measurable impact; failed to fully involve partners; narrowly focused responses, usually on offenders; and showed a number of other weaknesses in the response development process.

As documented by Boba (2003), there are many ways through which the practice of problem analysis can be enriched, including the hiring and training of problem analysts within police departments, federal funding for problem-oriented projects and the publication and dissemination of problem-analysis activities, the participation of other city agencies in data sharing and analysis, and the encouragement and promotion of problem analysis by nonprofit and membership institutions such as the Police Foundation, PERF, Vera Institute of Justice, and the International Association of Chiefs

of Police. Academics also have much to offer in the advancement of problem analysis. In addition to providing training in analytic methods and concepts and developing a body of problem-analysis literature, academics can conduct problem analyses and high-quality action research evaluations in partnership with criminal justice agencies. Historically, partnerships between academics and police practitioners have been characterized by role conflicts, such as researchers reporting the “bad news” that an evaluated program was not effective in preventing crime. For academic researchers, success or failure matters less than the commitment to the development of knowledge on what does and what doesn’t work in preventing crime (Weisburd, 1994). For the police, this news could be interpreted as their personal failure, and the skepticism of academics can be viewed as irritating (Weisburd, 1994). In recent years, partnerships between police and academics have been much more collaborative and focused on working together in addressing crime problems. Unfortunately, the number of academics with the experience and expertise in working with police departments on problem analysis and response development is currently small (Boba, 2003). The challenge to the field is to increase these collaborations by educating police departments about the benefits of working with academics and to encourage uninvolved academics to learn more about and participate in problem analysis and problem-oriented policing projects.

LOWELL GANG VIOLENCE PROBLEM ANALYSIS

METHOD

The Lowell exercise departed from the strict, or at least heavier, research and evaluation roles traditionally played by academics (e.g., see Empey, 1980; Sherman, 1991). The work was organized as an integrated academic-practitioner partnership more closely resembling a policy analysis exercise that blends research, policy design, action, and evaluation (Kennedy & Moore, 1995; Lewin, 1947). The problem analysis combined quantitative and qualitative methods to get a handle on Lowell’s homicide and nonfatal serious gun violence problem. To develop a knowledge base from which to start, a PSN working group comprised of Lowell Police Department (LPD) officers, Middlesex County prosecutors, probation officers, assistant U.S. attorneys, and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) agents met regularly to discuss the nature of serious violence in

Lowell. As they saw it, serious violence was concentrated among young, minority males in a few disadvantaged neighborhoods; many victims and offenders were active, chronic offenders; and a bulk of the city's homicide and nonfatal serious gun violence was being driven by gang activity. The problem analysis research was framed in large part to test and refine these key notions.

Official data systems in Lowell provided much data on the basic characteristics of homicide and serious gun violence incidents and participants (sex, age, race, location, and weapon) as well as data on the criminal histories and criminal justice system involvement of victims and offenders. These official data systems, however, could not provide rich information on the nature of homicide and serious gun violence incidents. Nor could these systems help sufficiently with the key questions of whether, as local practitioners believed, Lowell did have a gang problem or whether to detail the number of gangs and gang members in Lowell and identifiable conflicts between gangs. Therefore, qualitative methods were used to structure practitioner knowledge in these important areas. These methods are described in the following sections, as the results of the problem-analysis exercise are presented.

RESULTS OF THE PROBLEM ANALYSIS

We begin our problem analysis by providing a brief sociodemographic description of Lowell. We then present trends and patterns in Lowell homicide and gun violence, describe the criminal histories and criminal justice system involvement of homicide and aggravated gun assault victims and offenders, examine the circumstances of homicide and aggravated gun assault incidents, and describe Lowell gangs and the nature of their conflicts. It is worth noting here that, relative to mega-cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, the numbers of incidents and participants are small. However, these modest numbers provide an opportunity to conduct careful research on a census of events rather than engaging sampling procedures in an attempt to get a representative look at the nature of violence. Moreover, relative to America's mega-cities, there are many more small and medium cities with problems akin to the size and scope of Lowell's violence problem. It is important to generate knowledge and understanding of these violence problems so that criminal justice practitioners can effectively address the serious violence that erodes the quality of life in smaller cities.

Description of Lowell, Massachusetts. Lowell, Massachusetts is a small city located about 30 miles northeast of Boston and has a geographic expanse of 14.5 square miles. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Lowell had 105,167 residents that were 68.6% White, 16.5% Asian, 4.2% Black, and 10.7% mixed or other race; 14% of Lowell residents considered themselves Hispanic. The median annual income of Lowell residents is \$39,192 and the median home value is \$134,200. This is well below the Massachusetts median annual income of \$50,502 and median home value of \$185,700. Like most urban centers, a small proportion of Lowell residents live in poverty: 13.6% of Lowell residents live below the poverty level as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Although only 11.1% of Lowell households were female headed with children younger than 18 years of age, 32.3% of these families lived below the poverty level.

Lowell homicide and gun violence trends and patterns. Between 1993 and 2002, the city of Lowell experienced relatively modest yearly numbers of homicides (see Figure 1). For this 10-year period, Lowell's average yearly homicide rate, 5.8 per 100,000, was less than Boston (10.7) but was comparable to the smaller Massachusetts cities of Brockton (7.8), Lawrence (5.9), Springfield (8.8), and Worcester (4.3). In 1994, Lowell experienced nine homicides, and this high point was followed by a steady decrease in the yearly number of homicides to a low of three homicides in 1999. None of the three 1999 homicides were committed with a firearm. Unfortunately, Lowell, like many U.S. cities, experienced an increase in homicide between 2000 and 2002. Homicides in 2002 were more likely to involve a firearm than in previous years. Six of seven 2002 homicides were committed with firearms. Between 2000 and 2002, the yearly numbers of Lowell gun assault incidents were stable as the city averaged about 59 gun assault incidents per year (see Figure 2). However, the yearly number of shots fired calls for service increased by 29% from 82 in 2001 to 106 in 2002.

Similar to violence problems in other cities, Lowell homicide and serious gun assault incidents were concentrated among young, minority males residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In 2002, 34 of the 62 gun assault incidents were classified as aggravated gun assaults, usually involving injury to the victim(s) in the incident. According to LPD records, 51 victims and 22 identified offenders were involved in these incidents. Of the 51 aggravated gun assault victims, roughly 61% were male, 39% were His-

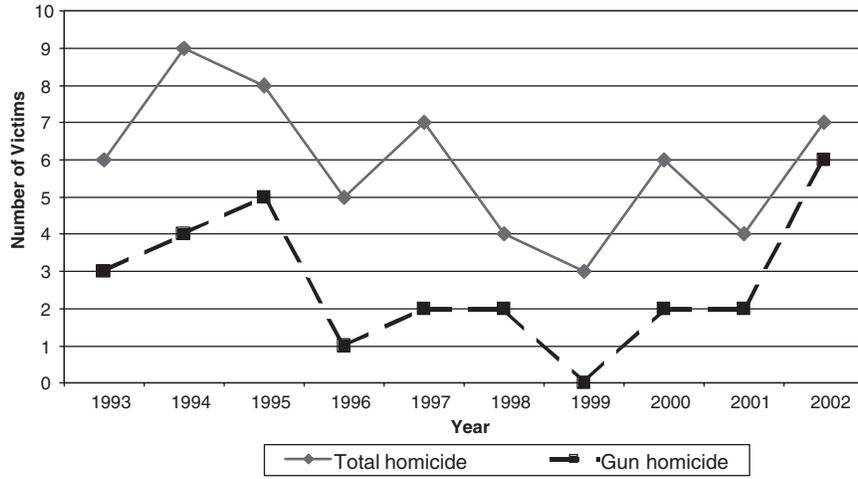


FIGURE 1: Homicide in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1993-2000

Source: 1993-1999 FBI Supplementary Homicide Reports, 2000-2002 Lowell Police Department.

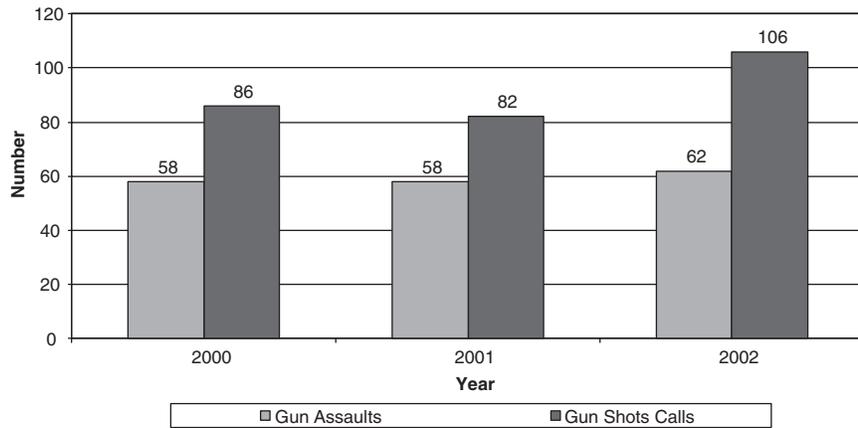


FIGURE 2: Lowell Gun Assault Incidents and Gun Shots Calls for Service, 2000-2002

Source: Lowell Police Department.

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Lowell Homicide and Aggravated Gun Assault Victims and Offenders

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Aggravated Gun Assaults 2002</i>		<i>Homicides 2000-2002</i>	
	<i>Offenders</i>	<i>Victims</i>	<i>Offenders</i>	<i>Victims</i>
<i>N</i>	22	51	19	17
Male	95.5%	60.8%	100.0%	100.0%
White	31.8%	33.3%	15.8%	11.8%
Black	9.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Hispanic	45.5%	39.2%	57.9%	52.9%
Asian	13.6%	27.5%	26.3%	29.4%
Other	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.9%
17 and younger	13.6%	31.4%	5.3%	10.0%
18 to 24	31.9%	23.5%	73.6%	64.7%
25 and older	54.5%	44.9%	21.1%	29.4%
Minimum age	16	11	16	17
Maximum age	36	59	33	40
Mean age	25.2	24.7	22.2	24.2

panic, 28% were Asian, and 68% were 24 or younger (see Table 1). Of the 22 identified aggravated gun assault offenders, roughly 96% were male, 46% were Hispanic, 14% were Asian, and 46% were 24 or younger. Between 2000 and 2002, there were 17 homicide victims and 19 identified homicide offenders. Of the 17 homicide victims, all were male, 53% were Hispanic, 29% were Asian, and 75% were 24 or younger. Of the 19 identified homicide offenders, all were male, 58% were Hispanic, 26% were Asian, and 79% were 24 or younger. Mapping of 2002 gun assault incidents and shots fired calls reveals that gun violence problems are mostly concentrated in poor, minority neighborhoods located in the downtown, Back Central, Centralville, and Lower Highlands sections of the city (see Figure 3).¹

Criminal offending and criminal justice system involvement of homicide and aggravated gun assault victims and offenders. To determine the extent of prior criminal involvement of Lowell homicide and aggravated gun assault victims and offenders, the names and dates of birth of these individuals were matched against the Massachusetts Criminal History System Board's Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) database. The results of our analysis revealed a population with high levels of prior criminal involvement (see Table 2). Homicide offenders and gun assault offenders were also more criminally active than their victims. Some 95% of homicide offenders, 82% of aggravated assault offenders, 65% of homicide

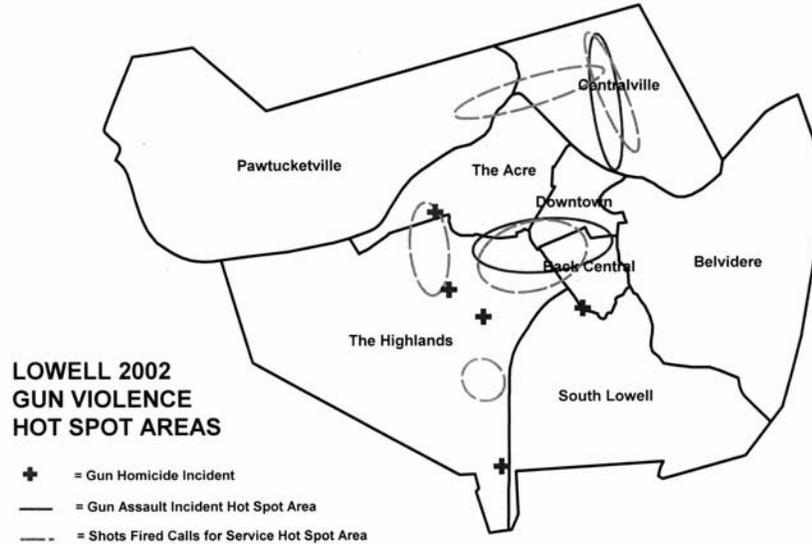


FIGURE 3: Lowell 2002 Gun Violence Hot Spot Areas

TABLE 2. Criminal Histories of Lowell Homicide and Aggravated Gun Assault Victims and Offenders

	<i>Aggravated Gun Assaults 2002</i>		<i>Homicides 2000-2002</i>	
	<i>Offenders</i>	<i>Victims</i>	<i>Offenders</i>	<i>Victims</i>
<i>N</i>	22	51	19	17
Known to CJ system	81.8%	45.1%	94.7%	64.7%
Individuals known to CJ system				
<i>N</i>	18	23	18	11
Prior armed violent crime	66.7%	39.1%	88.9%	27.3%
Prior unarmed violent crime	72.2%	69.6%	55.6%	63.6%
Prior property crime	55.6%	60.9%	72.2%	36.4%
Prior drug crime	61.1%	30.4%	44.4%	36.4%
Prior nonviolent gun crime	16.7%	0.0%	33.3%	9.1%
Prior disorder offense	88.9%	73.9%	83.3%	63.6%
Total prior crimes	216	157	170	36
Mean	12	6.8	9.4	3.3
Median	7.5	7.0	7.5	1.0

Note: CJ = criminal justice.

victims, and 45% of aggravated assault victims were arraigned at least once in Massachusetts courts before they committed their crime or were victimized. Individuals that were previously known to the criminal justice system

TABLE 3. Criminal Justice System Involvement of Lowell Homicide and Aggravated Gun Assault Victims and Offenders

	<i>Aggravated Gun Assaults 2002</i>		<i>Homicides 2000-2002</i>	
	<i>Offenders</i>	<i>Victims</i>	<i>Offenders</i>	<i>Victims</i>
<i>N</i>	18	23	18	11
Active probation	44.4%	39.1%	44.4%	18.2%
Prior probation	66.7%	65.2%	88.9%	36.4%
Restraining order	55.6%	30.4%	22.2%	18.2%
Prior commitment	44.4%	43.5%	94.4%	27.3%

were involved in a wide variety of offenses and, on average, committed many prior crimes. Lowell homicide and gun violence victims and offenders were arraigned for prior armed violent crimes, unarmed violent crimes, property crimes, drug crimes, nonviolent gun crimes (such as illegal gun possession), and disorder offenses. On average, aggravated gun assault offenders had been arraigned for 12 prior offenses, homicide offenders had been arraigned for 9 prior offenses, aggravated gun assault victims had been arraigned for 7 prior offenses, and homicide victims had been arraigned for only 3 prior offenses. The criminal histories of Lowell homicide and gun assault offenders and victims were characterized by a wide range of offenses—or “cafeteria-style” offending, as Malcolm Klein (1995) termed it in his research on gang offending patterns.

Lowell homicide and gun assault offenders and victims also had extensive experience with criminal justice system supervision (see Table 3). For individuals previously known to the criminal justice system, 44% of both homicide offenders and gun assault offenders, 39% of gun assault victims, and 18% of homicide victims were under active probation supervision at the time they committed their crime or were victimized. Before they committed murder, a large majority of homicide offenders previously known to the criminal justice system had been committed to an adult or juvenile corrections facility (94%), had been under prior probation supervision (89%), or subjected to a restraining order (22.2%). For aggravated gun assault offenders previously known to the criminal justice system, 67% had been under probation supervision, 56% subjected to a restraining order, and 44% had been committed to an adult or juvenile corrections facility. For homicide victims previously known to the criminal justice system, 36% had been under probation supervision, 18% subjected to a restraining order, and 27% had been committed to an adult or juvenile corrections facility.

Gang involvement in homicide and aggravated gun assault incidents. Were homicide and nonfatal serious gun violence in Lowell driven by gang activity, and if so, to what extent? This question was addressed by examining official LPD information on the seventeen 2000–2002 Lowell homicides and thirty-four 2002 aggravated gun assault incidents and on the individuals associated with those incidents and by discussing each incident with LPD detectives and officers. We were trying to assess, essentially, whether the incidents were tied to a gang dynamic, whether the victim was a gang member and the motivation behind the incident was believed to be connected to gang activity, or whether the offender was a gang member and the motivation behind the incident was believed to be connected to gang activity. This could include events as diverse as homicides motivated by direct gang business interests and homicides motivated by much more personal “respect” issues that nonetheless had significant gang aspects.

The assessment of each of these incidents, and of the larger picture that emerges, is inherently judgmental. Our main interest here, however, was not to say exactly how much gangs contribute to homicide but to answer with some confidence the broader question of whether there is a substantial gang violence problem in Lowell. We are confident that findings that follow are sufficiently reliable to help answer that question. From the outset, we recognized that defining the term *gang* is a very complex issue (Ball & Curry, 1995). Although criminal justice practitioners in Lowell use the word *gang*, it is mostly a term of convenience, meaning in practice “a self-identified group of youth who act corporately (at least sometimes) and violently (at least sometimes).”² Thus, what *gang* means in Lowell bears little resemblance to what it means, for instance, in Chicago or Los Angeles. Although the definition of gang used in this exercise is well within the bounds of standard police and academic practice, it is used here as a placeholder that conveys no additional information about the nature of gangs in Lowell. This question could have been easily reframed as “Does Lowell have a serious violence problem connected to this group phenomenon we have agreed to call gangs?” Developing a better definition of gang, ascertaining whether Lowell had gangs by this definition, and then determining whether these gangs were a problem—with problem defined in some way that was independent from the existence of gangs as such—were beyond the scope of this inquiry.

Whether a homicide or aggravated gun assault incident was gang related was determined as follows. First, the names and birth dates of the participants in homicide and aggravated gun assault incidents were matched

against the LPD gang member tracking database to determine which individuals were known gang members.³ Second, a focus group of detectives and officers from the LPD Investigative Services Division and the LPD Gang Unit with extensive street knowledge was convened. These detectives and officers examined each individual on the homicide and aggravated gun assault lists and reported whether that individual was known as a gang member and to which gang that individual belonged. The LPD detectives and officers then shared any knowledge they had concerning the context in which each homicide and aggravated gun assault incident occurred. The database search and focus group review revealed that 73.7% of 19 homicide offenders, 45.5% of 22 aggravated gun assault offenders, 47.1% of 17 homicide victims, and 29.4% of 51 aggravated gun assault victims were active gang members.

Law enforcement agencies in different cities use different definitions for gang-related crime (Maxson & Klein, 1990). For example, Los Angeles police define crime as gang related when gang members participate, regardless of motive. Chicago police use a more restrictive definition and classify homicides as gang related only if there is a gang motive evident. For our purposes, drawing on gang research conducted in Boston, homicides and aggravated gun assault incidents were considered connected to gang activity if (a) the offender or the victim (but not necessarily both) was a gang member and (b) the motivation behind the violent event was known or believed to be connected to gang activity (Kennedy, Braga, & Piehl, 1997). Thus, the killing or assault of a gang member by another gang member in a dispute over contested turf would be considered gang related; the killing or assault of a non-gang innocent bystander during the same dispute would be considered gang related; the killing or assault of a gang member by a non-gang member during a robbery attempt or a domestic dispute would not be considered gang related. Using this method, 70.5% of the homicides and 35.3% of the aggravated gun assault incidents were considered gang related or gang related with a drug business nexus (see Table 4).

Estimating gang membership and identifying gang conflicts in Lowell. One key question concerned the extent of gang membership in Lowell. The same focus group of detectives and officers from the LPD Investigative Services Division and the LPD Gang Unit was convened again to identify active gangs, estimate the membership of each gang, and describe any antagonisms between active gangs. The group identified 19 active street gangs in Lowell with between 650 and 750 members. Hispanic and Asian

TABLE 4. Characteristics of Lowell Homicide and Aggravated Gun Assault Incidents

<i>Motive</i>	<i>Aggravated Gun Assaults 2002</i>	<i>Homicides 2000-2002</i>
<i>N</i>	34	17
Gang-related	26.5%	52.9%
Gang- and drug-related	8.8%	17.6%
Drug	11.8%	11.7%
Personal dispute	20.6%	11.7%
Domestic dispute	17.6%	0.0%
Robbery/carjacking/home invasion	11.8%	5.9%

youth dominate Lowell's gang scene. Lowell gangs are small, relatively disorganized groups. At the time of the focus group meeting, the Latin Kings and the Asian Boyz were the largest gangs, with upper end estimates of some 100 members each. Of Lowell's 19 gangs, only 6 (31.6%) had between 50 and 100 members (Asian Boyz, Dangerous Little Bloods, Moonlight Strangers, Original Bloods, Tiny Rascals Gang (Grey Rag), and Latin Kings), 4 (21.1%) had between 25 and 49 members, and the remaining 9 (47.3%) gangs had 24 or fewer members. Research on the age distribution of gang members suggests a range between early adolescents and young adults (Spergel, 1995). Although it is difficult to set upper and lower bounds on the age distribution of gang members, in practice, most gang members are between the ages of 15 and 24 years of age. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Lowell had 17,013 residents between the ages of 15 and 24 years of age. Thus, we estimated that these gang members represent between 3.8% and 4.4% of that age group in the city. The small proportion of all youth residents participating in gangs is consistent with estimates from other cities (e.g., see Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993).

LPD officers and detectives suggest that most gang conflicts were personal and vendetta-like. Although some disputes involved drug business and money issues, the bulk of gang violence involved a cycle of retaliation between groups with a history of antagonisms. Most research on gang violence has found that violent behavior tends to be expressive and often retaliatory in nature rather than instrumental (Block & Block, 1993; Decker, 1996; Klein & Maxson, 1989). Conflicts among Lowell gangs fall into two broad categories: Asian gang disputes and Hispanic gang disputes. Gang rivalries generally do not cross these ethnic lines. Figure 4 presents a network construction of gang conflicts. It is noteworthy that not all active gangs were involved in an identifiable dispute, or "beef," and that even the

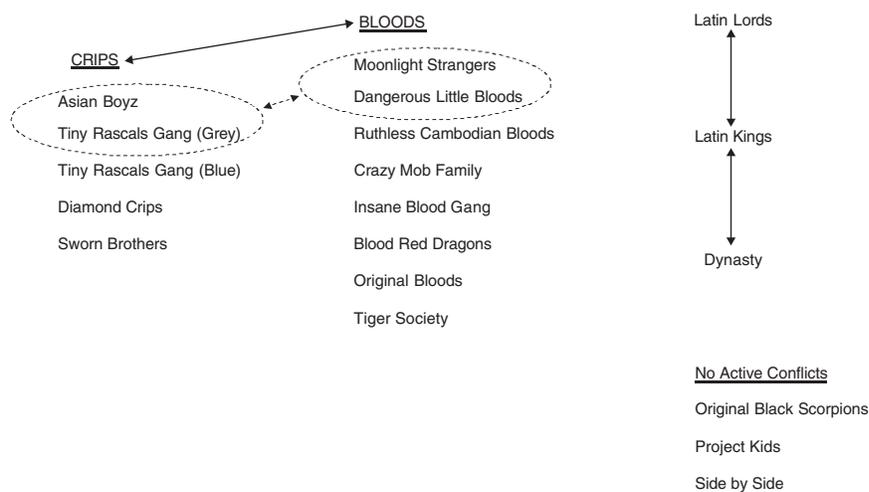


FIGURE 4: Lowell Gang Rivalries

gangs that were in the thick of violent conflicts were only beefing with a handful of other gangs. Conflicts among Asian gangs were among clusters of Bloods and Crips gangs composed mostly of Laotian and Cambodian youth. The central Asian gang conflict involved a fierce dispute between the Tiny Rascals Gang (Grey Rag) and Asian Boyz subsets of the Crips and the Dangerous Little Bloods and Moonlight Strangers subsets of the Bloods. Conflicts among Hispanic gangs mainly involved a very violent rivalry between the Latin Lords and the Latin Kings. The Latin Kings also had an emergent dispute with a small mixed-race gang called Dynasty that involved street-level sales of marijuana.

Lowell gangs do not claim and defend turf. Rather, they operate fluidly across the city and have identifiable connections to gangs in other cities. For example, the Latin Kings affiliate and do business with other Latin Kings gangs in the Massachusetts cities of Lawrence, Lynn, and Springfield as well as cities in Rhode Island and Connecticut. Lowell Asian gangs have strong ties to Asian gangs operating in the California cities of Stockton and Long Beach. LPD officers and detectives felt strongly that active conflicts were best understood in terms of social networks rather than gun violence hot spots. This finding mirrors previous gang research in Minneapolis that found the operations of street gangs were not limited to particular places in

the city (Kennedy & Braga, 1998). As such, the mapping of gang territories was not pursued as part of the problem analysis. In other cities, such as Boston (Kennedy et al., 1997) and Los Angeles (Tita et al., 2003), the mapping of gang territories was a very productive exercise. As mentioned earlier in this article, the nature and character of gangs varies within and across cities and problem analysts need to be sensitive to these variations in their diagnoses of gang problems.

RESPONSE DEVELOPMENT

The problem analysis revealed that Lowell homicide and serious gun violence was highly concentrated among a small population of gang-involved chronic offenders. Identifiable, ongoing conflicts between specific gangs were central to Lowell's gang violence problem. The Lowell response to gang violence fits well within the blended approach suggested by Spergel and Curry (1993). The Spergel and Curry typology includes five broad strategies: suppression, social intervention, social opportunities provision, organizational change, and community mobilization. Suppression strategies assume that most gangs are criminal associations that must be attacked through efficient gang tracking, identification, and target enforcement. Social intervention strategies encompass social service agency-based and detached gang streetworker programs that focus on emergency intervention, particularly in response to acts of violence or personal need. Opportunity provision strategies attempt to offer gang members legitimate opportunities and means to success that are at least as appealing as illegitimate options. Strategies that concentrate on organizational change typically develop a task force to address gang problems through consensus building and coordinated action. Community organization strategies to cope with gang problems include attempts to create community solidarity, networking, education, and involvement.

GENERAL GANG VIOLENCE PREVENTION STRATEGY

The general Lowell gang violence strategy borrows heavily from Boston's well-known Operation Ceasefire intervention (see Kennedy, Braga, & Piehl, 2001). An interagency working group, comprised of criminal justice organizations, social service agencies, and community-based groups, was convened to focus prevention, intervention, and enforcement activities on gang members involved in violent conflicts. The working group was devel-

oped from Lowell's "Safety First" initiative that focused the same organizations on domestic violence and juvenile crime issues (see Hartmann, 2002). The new task for the group was to focus its combined powers tightly on the small number of gangs and gang members who generated the bulk of Lowell's serious violence problem. Key members of the working group included the LPD, Middlesex County prosecutors, federal prosecutors, ATF agents, probation officers, parole officers, and Department of Youth Services (DYS, or juvenile corrections in Massachusetts) caseworkers as well as city-employed streetworkers (social service providers that worked on the street instead of in an office), YMCA/YWCA and Big Brother/Big Sisters programs, and selected neighborhood-based groups when the working group was addressing gang violence concentrated in their community.

The working group engaged the "pulling levers" focused deterrence strategy that involved deterring violent behavior by chronic gang offenders by reaching out directly to gangs, saying explicitly that violence would no longer be tolerated, and backing that message by "pulling every lever" legally available when violence occurred (Kennedy, 1997). Lowell gangs were not subjected to increased law enforcement attention arbitrarily nor did the working group develop a "hit list" of gangs. Rather, enforcement actions by the working group were triggered by outbreaks of gang violence. As was the case in Boston, Lowell gangs selected themselves for focused law enforcement attention by engaging in violence. When gang violence occurred, working group members sent a direct message to violent gang members that they were "under the microscope" because of their violent behavior. Police officers, probation officers, and DHS caseworkers immediately flooded the targeted gang's turf and communicated to gang members that their presence was due to the violence. Streetworkers walked the streets and explained that they wanted the violence to stop and supported the efforts of their law enforcement counterparts to cease the violence. Streetworkers also made offers of services and opportunities to gang members.

As operations focused on particular gangs unfolded, members of the working group assessed the enforcement levers available to cease violent gang activity. Enforcement responses were tailored to particular gangs and often included a wide range of actions such as probation checks, changes in community supervision conditions, serving outstanding arrest warrants, special prosecutorial attention to crimes committed by violent gang members, increased disorder enforcement, and the disruption of street-level drug markets. Building on the Boston experience, the basic premise of Lowell's application of pulling levers was to take advantage of the chronic offending

behaviors of gang members. It was important to recognize that gang members were vulnerable to a variety of criminal justice sanctions and that targeted enforcement actions could be used to good effect in controlling their violent behavior. The enforcement actions were only as harsh as necessary to stop a particular gang from engaging in violence. For many gang members, heightened levels of police, probation, and DYS enforcement were sufficient to end the violence. For certain hardcore gang members, it was necessary to involve the enhanced enforcement capabilities of the federal authorities to stop the violence.

Although enforcement actions were carried out, the members of the working group continued communications with violent gang members. A direct and explicit message was delivered to violent gangs that violent behavior would no longer be tolerated and that the interagency group would use whatever means were legally available to stop the violence. This message was communicated to other gangs not engaged in violence so they would understand what was happening to the violent gang and why it was happening. In addition to talking to gang members on the street, the deterrence message was delivered by handing out fliers explaining the enforcement actions and through forums with gang members (see Kennedy, 1997). Forums were usually held in a public facility such as a courthouse or community recreational center. Gang members under criminal justice system supervision were required to attend the forum by their probation or parole officers; gang-involved juveniles under DYS community supervision were required to attend by their caseworkers. Representatives of the different law enforcement agencies explained their actions to the gang members in attendance. Streetworkers and community members voiced their support of the law enforcement actions, asked the youth to stop the violence, and reiterated their offers of services and opportunities.

The law enforcement members of the larger group also met separately to focus enforcement efforts on "impact players," or individuals who were particularly dangerous and served as "carriers" of criminal ideas across social networks and whose presence in particular groups facilitated violent action. The criminal justice practitioners felt strongly that within violent gangs, there were a very small number of particularly dangerous youth that did not want social intervention and that needed to be removed from the street to protect themselves and other youth from their violent behavior. This subgroup of the larger task force believed that identifying and incarcerating these impact players would produce greater crime prevention benefits by focusing scarce law enforcement resources on highly active gang

members who spread ideas or facilitated violent action. The identification process was largely based on subjective street intelligence gathered by law enforcement officials interacting closely with gang members.

ASIAN GANG VIOLENCE PREVENTION STRATEGY

The working group felt very confident about its ability to prevent violence among Hispanic gangs by pursuing a general pulling levers strategy. However, the Lowell authorities felt much less confident about their ability to prevent Asian gang violence by applying the same set of criminal justice levers to Asian gang members. As Malcolm Klein (1995) suggested, Asian gangs have some key differences from typical Black, Hispanic, and White street gangs. They are more organized, have identifiable leaders, and are far more secretive. They also tend to be far less territorial and less openly visible. Therefore, their street presence is low compared to other ethnic gangs. Relationships between law enforcement agencies and the Asian community are often characterized by mistrust and a lack of communication (Chin, 1996). As such, it is often difficult for the police to develop information on the participants in violent acts to hold offenders accountable for their actions.

Asian street gangs are sometimes connected to adult criminal organizations and assist older criminals in extortion activities and protecting illegal gambling enterprises (Chin, 1996). In many East Asian cultures, rituals and protocols guiding social interactions are well defined and reinforced through a variety of highly developed feelings of obligation, many of which are hierarchical in nature (Zhang, 2002). This facilitates some control over the behavior of younger Asian gang members by elders in the gang. In Lowell, Cambodian and Laotian gangs were comprised of youth whose street activities were influenced by "elders" of the gang. Elders were generally long-time gang members in their 30s and 40s that no longer engaged in illegal activities on the street or participated in street-level violence with rival youth. Rather, these older gang members were heavily involved in running illegal gambling dens and casinos that were operated out of cafes, video stores, and warehouses located in the poor Asian neighborhoods of Lowell. The elders used young street gang members to protect their business interests and to collect any unpaid gambling debts. Illegal gaming is a very lucrative business that is much more important to the elders than any ongoing beefs the youth in their gang have with other youth. In contrast to acquiring information on individuals responsible for gun crimes in Asian

communities, it is much easier to detect the presence of gambling operations through surveillance or a simple visit to the suspected business establishment.

The importance of illegal gaming to influential members of Asian street gangs provides a potentially potent lever to law enforcement in preventing violence. The authorities in Lowell believed that they could systematically prevent street violence among gangs by targeting the gambling interests of older members. When a street gang is violent, the LPD targets the gambling businesses run by the older members of the gang. The enforcement activities range from serving a search warrant on the business that houses the illegal enterprise and making arrests to simply placing a patrol car in front of the suspected gambling location to deter gamblers from entering. The LPD couples these tactics with the delivery of a clear message: "When the gang kids associated with you act violently, we will shut down your gambling business. When violence erupts, no one makes money." Between October 2002 and June 2003, the LPD conducted some 30 search warrants on illegal gambling dens that resulted in more than 100 gambling-related arrests.

Although this approach to preventing violence among Asian street gangs represents an innovation in policing, it is not an entirely new idea. The social control exerted by older Asian criminals over their younger counterparts is well documented in the literature on Asian crime. For example, in his study of Chinese gangs in New York City, Ko-Lin Chin (1996) suggested that gang leaders exert influence over subordinate gang members to end violent confrontations so they can focus their energies on illegal enterprises that make money. The prospect of controlling street violence by cracking down on the interests of organized crime is also familiar to law enforcement. In his classic study of an Italian street gang in Boston's North End, Whyte (1943) described the activities of beat officers in dealing with outbreaks of violence by cracking down on the gambling rackets run by organized crime in the neighborhood. Nevertheless, the systematic application of this approach, coupled with a communications campaign, represents an innovative way to deal with Asian street gang violence.

ASSESSMENT

Assessing the effectiveness of implemented responses to crime problems is key in driving the problem-oriented policing process. The Harvard and Northeastern research team will be completing a rigorous statistical evalua-

tion of the Lowell strategy after an appropriate post-implementation time period has elapsed. However, given the seriousness of their homicide and gun assault problem, the interagency working group could not wait until a rigorous evaluation was completed to figure out whether their responses were working or in need of adjustment. The working group needed real-time performance measurement. A simple analysis of homicide and gun assault data suggests that the package of interventions seems to be preventing serious gun violence. The problem-oriented responses were first implemented in October 2002. Comparing the 9-month period between October 2002 and June 2003 to the 9-month period between October 2001 and June 2002, Lowell experienced a 24% reduction in gun assault incidents (from 49 to 37) and a 50% reduction in homicides (from 4 to 2). As described earlier, between 2000 and 2002, yearly counts of Lowell gun assault incidents were remarkably stable and yearly counts of Lowell homicides were increasing. In addition to these preliminary overall reductions, there was not a single incident of Asian gang-on-gang gun violence during this time period.⁴ Although these figures are, by scientific standards, not convincing evidence of a program effect, they certainly suggest that the problem-oriented approach has added some value to the prevention of gang violence in Lowell.

CONCLUSION

The broad lesson to be learned from this research is the considerable value added to the development of crime prevention strategies by in-depth problem analysis. For complex problems such as gang violence, a deep understanding of the nature of the problem is crucial in framing appropriate responses. The analysis revealed that criminally active gang members, who had ongoing disputes with rival gangs, were central to Lowell's homicide and gun violence problem. The "pulling levers" focused deterrence strategy broadly fit the nature of the violence and was appropriately tailored to the nature of gangs and the operational capacities of law enforcement organizations, social service agencies, and community-based groups in Lowell. Similar to the experiences of other cities, the core activities of the problem-oriented framework developed in Boston was productive in constructing a response that, at first blush, seems to be helping in dealing with gang violence in Lowell.

The problem analysis exercise described here benefited greatly from a solid working partnership between criminal justice practitioners and academic researchers. The research team essentially provided “real-time social science” aimed at refining the interagency working group’s understanding of gang violence, creating information products for both strategic and tactical use, testing—often in elementary, but important, fashion—prospective intervention ideas, and maintaining a focus on outcomes and the evaluation of performance. None of the research described here was very sophisticated methodologically. But the ability to pin down key issues—such as who was killing and being killed, the role played by gangs and gang conflicts, and the structure of Asian gangs—kept the working group moving on solid ground, helped the participating agencies understand the logic of the proposed intervention (and the illogic of at least some competing interventions), and helped justify the intervention to the public. Clearly, practitioner-academic partnerships add much value to the understanding of crime problems and the development of appropriate responses. Unfortunately, such partnerships are uncommon. The challenge remains to encourage these collaborations through the education of police practitioners and researchers in the principles and methods of problem-oriented policing and the benefits of working together.

NOTES

1. Gun violence hot spot areas were identified using the Spatial and Temporal Analysis of Crime (STAC) module of the CrimeStat 2 spatial statistics software program available from the U.S. National Institute of Justice’s Mapping Analysis for Public Safety program home page (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/maps/tools.html>).

2. The definition used by the Lowell working group was essentially the same as the one used by the Boston Gun Project working group (see Kennedy, Braga, & Piehl, 1997, p. 232).

3. The Lowell Police Department (LPD) does not follow a formal protocol that determines an individual’s status as a “known gang member.” LPD Gang Unit officers make a subjective assessment based on an individual’s involvement in criminal activity and exhibition of gang-related characteristics (such as admitting gang membership, wearing gang colors, or having gang tattoos).

4. Whether a gun violence event involves Asian gang-on-gang violence was determined by running the names of participants in homicide and gun assault incidents through the LPD gang member database and collecting qualitative information from LPD gang unit officers on the nature of any incidents involving at least one gang member.

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