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A Systematic Review of Project Safe Neighborhoods Effects

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ABSTRACT

Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) is an ongoing national program, implemented by U.S. Attorney's Offices and funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, to address gun and gang violence in local jurisdictions within all 94 federal districts in the United States. While dozens of studies have evaluated the local effects of PSN programs, a comprehensive review of PSN literature is missing; this article addresses that gap. The current study conducts a systematic review of empirical studies of PSN programs from 2001 to 2021 across nine major academic databases and five websites. Twenty-one evaluations were retained for a detailed review and categorized based on Maryland Scientific Methods Scale values. PSN initiatives produce overall favorable results in reducing violence in the short-term, though long-term impacts are rarely explored. PSN had an indicated positive effect on 91.9% of the examined outcomes, 54.5% of which attained statistical significance. Task force members state that likelihood of PSN success improves when working groups remain consistent in personnel, communicate regularly, and achieve buy-in from all involved parties. Future research should report effect sizes when appropriate, evaluate PSN programs absent in other high-populated areas, and employ more rigorous experimental and quasi-experimental designs so a meta-analysis can be conducted.

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Project safe neighborhoods; policing; focused deterrence; gun crime; systematic review

Introduction

During the 1990s, changes in violent crime rates, social and political unrest directed at law enforcement, and numerous technological innovations set the stage for major changes in the administration of criminal justice. Several innovative approaches to policing were tested during this decade, seeking to take tougher, smarter, more focused approaches to gun violence, gang crime, open air drug markets, and the recidivism of chronic offenders. These initiatives led to a new multi-agency program centered around focused deterrence strategies, targeted proactive policing, and

increased use of federal prosecutorial power, formalized as “Project Safe Neighborhoods” in 2001 and administered by the United States Department of Justice (DOJ).

Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) initiatives have received two decades of substantial, federal grant funding from the United States Department of Justice, totaling several billion dollars (McGarrell, Corsaro, Hipple, & Bynum, 2010), resulting in interventions across all 94 federal judicial districts (United States DOJ, 2020). PSN programs typically target violent crime problems related to guns, gangs, and drugs through interagency collaboration, data-driven interventions, and federal prosecution and incarceration for relevant state offenses.

Theoretically grounded in the “focused deterrence” framework, also known as “pulling levers,” this sweeping federal initiative has received considerable attention from criminal justice scholars, including grant-funded research partners assigned to evaluate specific PSN interventions and collaborate with practitioners in each federal district. These scholarly endeavors and research partnerships have produced a small, but significant body of evaluative work. Currently, RTI International and the Justice Research and Statistics Association are collaborating on a process and impact evaluation of PSN (RTI International, 2021); however, no comprehensive review and assessment of overall PSN effectiveness has been completed to date.

Researchers have conducted comprehensive analyses of focused deterrence and present encouraging indications of this framework’s impact (Braga, Weisburd, & Turchan, 2018). These broader analyses, however, are primarily composed of programs that are distinct from PSN, such as drug market interventions and violence reduction strategies that may not incorporate critical components of PSN, like the resources, personnel, and coordination of U.S. Attorneys Offices. It cannot be assumed that focused deterrence strategies have the same positive effect across all applications just because they are built on the same theoretical framework. Without a comprehensive review of PSN literature, it is challenging to identify best practices in implementing PSN programs, difficult to evaluate the overall effectiveness and value of PSN as a budget item and strategic focus, and unclear where future research into PSN should be directed.

How many empirical studies of PSN interventions exist to date? Are there any geographic or content-based gaps in our knowledge of this popular umbrella of initiatives? What are the underlying strategies of PSN based on? What has been found in the evaluations of PSN initiatives and what leads to effective implementation? This systematic review explores these questions in detail.

Background

A developing body of research has evaluated the theoretical underpinnings of PSN, and the history of PSN has been well-documented in academic journals, technical reports, and public government webpages. In this section, the focused deterrence approach underpinning PSN will be reviewed, followed by a brief history of its application in this initiative and its precursor programs.

Focused Deterrence

Deterrence is a fundamental goal of the criminal justice system (Cook, 1980; Mears, 2010; O'Shea, 2007; Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014). This classical theoretical approach assumes that people are rational, driven to commit crime when individual hedonistic calculus leads them to believe that the benefits of committing an offense outweigh risks and other costs in time, effort, and material (Zimring & Hawkins, 1973). The criminal justice strategy that results from this theoretical framework of behavioral economics is based in simple rational calculus: criminal justice institutions must alter the balance of costs and benefits of crime, so the risks of offending outweigh the reward. Traditionally, this is achieved by increasing the certainty, severity, and swiftness of punishment such that potential offenders are discouraged from first-time offending [*general deterrence*], while discouraging those who have already offended from continuing their previous deviance [*specific deterrence*] (Apel & Nagin, 2011; Beccaria, 2008; Cook & Campbell, 1979).

Focused deterrence is the union of classical deterrence theory and contemporary problem-oriented criminal justice. A *general* deterrence approach to a crime problem might demand the implementation of expensive and unpopular “blanket policing” interventions or harsher sentencing across the board, overwhelming correctional systems that already severely exceed design limits. Alternatively, *focused*-deterrence responses seek to efficiently channel labor and resources to the highest risk places and offenders through data-driven, strategic methods, tailoring the deterrent efforts of the criminal justice system to target specific crime problems in each unique community context (Braga, Kennedy, Waring, & Piehl, 2001; Braga et al., 2018). Rather than broadly increase the scale and scope of the criminal justice system, agencies can “pull” all specific “levers” relating to the crime problem they wish to reduce. Examples of lever-pulling strategies include proactively engaging high-risk offenders and providing resources and opportunities to discourage criminal behaviors; using sentence enhancements through federal prosecutions for relevant gun, gang, and drug offenses in high-crime neighborhoods; infiltrating drug markets; and systematically reviewing cases to identify and incapacitate the most prolific offenders, among other uniquely tailored strategies (Kennedy, 2006; Kennedy, Braga, Piehl, & Waring, 2001). This approach to deterrence is the primary theoretical framework of Project Safe Neighborhoods.

Though focused deterrence is a relatively recent criminal justice practice, the current consensus is that “pulling levers” is an effective, worthwhile crime-reduction strategy (Braga et al., 2018; McGarrell, 2020). In a recent meta-analytic update, Braga et al. (2018) found that focused deterrence practices are effective, albeit modestly, at reducing crime. While evaluations of “pulling levers” strategies have been positive for reducing community-level violence, the quantity and rigor of evaluations is lacking, especially when assessing long-term effects (Braga & Weisburd, 2012; Braga et al., 2018). Furthermore, evaluations conducted at the individual-offender level are scant and offer mixed results, rendering it unclear whether concerns such as the recidivism of violent offenders are effectively addressed by current focused deterrence initiatives (McGarrell, 2020). Despite lingering gaps in focused deterrence literature, the developing body of research on this strategy is encouraging.

History of Project Safe Neighborhoods

Project Safe Neighborhoods was not implemented overnight; the focused deterrence strategies which form the foundation of this initiative were first implemented in smaller programs during the mid-to-late 1990s. Three highly influential initiatives were implemented and studied prior to the launch of PSN in 2001.

The first of these, "Operation Ceasefire," also known as the "Boston Gun Project," targeted gang-related youth firearm violence in Boston beginning in 1996 (Rosenfeld, Fornango, & Baumer, 2005). This program's mechanisms included direct communication to youths of a strengthened criminal-justice system focus towards curbing unlawful firearm possession. "Public service announcement" style posters of this more rigorous enforcement in crime hot spots and other spatially precise "retail deterrence" approaches were employed. Evaluations of this program were generally favorable, indicating significant reductions in gang violence, gun crimes, shots-fired calls for service, and youth homicides (Braga et al., 2001; Kennedy et al., 2001; Piehl, Cooper, Braga, & Kennedy, 2003). However, studies which controlled for the trend of plummeting crime rates nationwide during the late 1990s suggest that the optimism surrounding Operation Ceasefire's true impacts may have been unfounded (Rosenfeld et al., 2005). Regardless, the extensive multi-agency partnership, including the U.S. Attorney's Office, Boston Police Department, and researchers from Harvard University, propelled this effort and did an effective job of marketing both this program's underlying strategies and connecting them to significant drops in violent crime within Boston during the implementation period.

Operation Ceasefire's presumed success blossomed into the second highly influential initiative, a nationwide effort known as the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative (SACSI), another program which strongly influenced Project Safe Neighborhoods. This program was rolled out in two phases (1998 and 2000) across ten cities in the United States and built upon Operation Ceasefire's most promising components. SACSI programs directed funding to district, precinct, or neighborhood-specific violent crime problems, leveraged data to tailor unique criminal-legal responses, and emphasized extensive collaboration between U.S. Attorneys' offices, state and local criminal justice systems, and research partners (Roehl et al., 2008). Evaluations of these programs were largely positive, lending support to collaborative, focused deterrence strategies (Bynum & McCluskey, 2007; Roehl et al., 2008).

A third highly influential program, "Project Exile" in Richmond, VA, was initiated in 1997 to reduce drug-related firearm violence. This program relied heavily on incapacitation-through-incarceration strategies that were popular during this time, leveraging federal sentence enhancements, mandatory minimums, and federal prosecutors to deter and incapacitate the highest-threat chronic offenders within Richmond (Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, 1999; Rosenfeld et al., 2005). Literature on this initiative is mixed (Raphael & Ludwig, 2003; Rosenfeld et al., 2005), and given tremendous financial, logistical, and community costs associated with mandatory minimum sentencing and aggressive incapacitation efforts throughout the past few decades, it is unclear whether this approach constitutes an effective use of resources. The strategies of interagency collaboration and extensive, targeted marketing of deterrent messaging are nevertheless reflected throughout PSN's history.

In 2001, Project Safe Neighborhoods was initiated as a national program to comprehensively reduce violence within local communities and incorporated lessons learned from those prior initiatives. PSN support was available to all 94 U.S. Attorney districts to develop task forces that would work together to address violent crime. While PSN allowed for jurisdictions to tailor initiatives to their own crime problems, districts were encouraged to include specific types of strategies: offender deterrence meetings, enhanced prosecution for violent criminals, curbing the offenders' access to firearms, and providing support services to at-risk offender populations. PSN initiatives were also designed to include partnerships with criminal justice agencies and community organizations, strategic planning, technical assistance training, and community outreach components (McGarrell et al., 2010). Financial support for PSN projects was based mostly on a competitive funding model (RTI International, 2021). Each year from 2012–2017, approximately \$5.5 million dollars was awarded to an average of 16 PSN projects (U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance, n.d.).

In 2017, the Department of Justice recommitted support to PSN. Formula grants were eligible to be awarded annually to all U.S. District Attorney Offices (RTI International, 2021). This recommitment increased financial support and the number of PSN funded projects. In 2018, \$81,449,516 was awarded to 160 PSN projects (U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance, n.d.). This recommitment also led to slight readjustments of key PSN elements to emphasize leadership by U.S. Attorneys, partnerships, data-driven targeted enforcement and prosecution practices, prevention of further violence, and accountability. The one-year progress report on this updated PSN model reported that most PSN projects employed partnerships with local (99%), state (83%), and federal (96%) law enforcement agencies and 56 percent partnered with a research team. However, only 47 percent of projects had established partnerships with community groups. Furthermore, most projects implemented focused deterrence (82%), hot spots policing (78%), and/or a lever-pulling approach (67%) in their target areas (United States D.O.J., 2019). In 2021, the core principles of PSN were revised once again to include fostering trust in communities, supporting community organizations whose purpose is to prevent violence, using focused and strategic enforcement tactics, and using research to inform decision-making (U.S. D.O.J., n.d.; RTI International, 2021).

Since its initial formulation, PSN has provided both technical and financial support to U.S. District Attorney Offices with the goal of reducing violent crime. Even though the PSN framework encourages districts to tailor responses to their own specific problems, there are core elements of PSN efforts that (in theory) should be common to all initiatives. Despite the changes made to PSN over the years, these components have consistently included the use of interagency and community partnerships, enhanced prosecution of violent offenders, targeted enforcement tactics (e.g., focused deterrence, hot spots policing, and lever-pulling), and data driven practices to enhance accountability.

Twenty years of nationwide PSN efforts have been built upon these core components and have produced a considerable amount of case studies, empirical evaluations, and other useful literature (see McGarrell, Perez, Carter, & Momenee, 2021). While some systematic reviews and meta-analyses have included PSN case studies, a comprehensive systematic review of PSN program literature has not yet been

conducted (Braga et al., 2018). Given that PSN constitutes its own unique framework and approach for addressing violence, examining this body of literature as a collective whole is warranted.

Prior analyses of focused deterrence interventions commonly include many drug market interventions (DMI), while PSN programs typically target gangs and high-risk gun crime offenders. This is not to say that these focused deterrence analyses of DMIs tell us nothing about PSN, since overlap exists between both applications. For example, PSN and DMIs use interagency collaboration, evidence-based practice, and offender identification and notification strategies to efficiently channel deterrent messaging. Furthermore, both are intended to reduce neighborhood-level violence. It is therefore not inappropriate to analyze PSN interventions and DMIs in the same meta-analysis.

A gap remains, however, because most PSN programs do not target open air drug markets, rendering PSN evaluations a distinct subset within the overall body of focused deterrence research. Although PSN programs and DMIs are built upon the same framework, the effectiveness of focused deterrence strategies may vary between these applications. Furthermore, many of the non-PSN gang and gun violence reduction programs evaluated by broad focused deterrence analyses lack key components of PSN that may play a significant role in its effectiveness, such as PSN's inclusion of U.S. Attorneys' Offices and federal prosecutorial power. Without a comprehensive review which specifically includes all available empirical PSN interventions, it is uncertain whether the generally favorable evaluations of broader focused deterrence approaches apply to PSN specifically.

Methods

The literature search for this systematic review focused on empirical studies published in English. While the Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) initiative was established in 2001, the search date range used was the earliest possible year (establishment of online database), to capture any PSN program evaluation study. The literature search was conducted to include all PSN program evaluations published through March 2021.

Several strategies were used to search for eligible empirical studies. First, a keyword search was conducted using the two keywords or phrases Project Safe Neighborhoods and PSN in conjunction with the terms "police," "policing" or "law enforcement" on nine online databases. Specifically, the following nine online databases that include prominent policing and criminology and criminal justice journals were searched: Criminal Justice Abstracts; Criminology Collection; Dissertations; Google Scholar; JSTOR; NCJRS Criminal Justice Topic Guide; ProQuest Criminal Justice; Sage Premier/Sage Journals Online; and SocINDEX. Second, a review of the selected publications' reference sections and previous PSN program evaluation studies was performed. Third, a search of government and research agencies' websites was conducted. Fourth, the following five federal and state websites were searched: U.S. DOJ Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. DOJ Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. DOJ Office of Justice Programs, and Michigan State University.¹ In addition to these five websites, NCJRS provides abstracts from federal justice websites in the search results.

These search strategies produced 8248 potentially relevant abstracts or studies that were further scrutinized to determine whether they met the eligibility criteria (Farrington & Petrosino, 2001). This additional screening process produced 2930 abstracts, yielding a much smaller number of potential studies. For inclusion in this systematic review, the selection criteria consisted of PSN program evaluation studies analyzing empirical data which were conducted independently by an outside scholar or entity. Ninety-eight studies met the inclusion criteria and were retained for further coding.

All 98 studies which had been retained to this point were assigned an empirical strength score ranging from 1 (weakest) to 5 (strongest) based on the Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods (SMS). Seventy-seven studies which did not include any empirical component, utilized solely qualitative methods, or did not perform any significance tests were excluded from the next phase of analysis.

The Maryland SMS scale was developed to characterize the internal validity of program evaluations within criminal justice (Sherman et al., 1998) “that can be understood and easily used by scholars, practitioners, policy makers, the mass media, and systematic reviewers” (Farrington, 2003, p. 49). The criteria used to grade studies were primarily derived from the work of Cook and Campbell (1979). This scale has been applied in a systematic review of over five hundred crime prevention program evaluations, the results of which were presented before the United States Congress in accordance with a federal grant awarded by the United States Department of Justice (Sherman et al., 1998).

The scale is as follows:

“Level 1: correlation between a crime prevention program and a measure of crime at one point in time.

Level 2: measures of crime before and after the program, with no comparable control condition.

Level 3: measures of crime before and after the program in experimental and comparable control conditions.

Level 4: measures of crime before and after the program in multiple experimental and control units, controlling for other variables that influence crime.

Level 5: random assignment of program and control conditions to units” (Sherman et al., 1998, pp. 4–5).

The three principal criteria, “control of other variables,” “measurement error,” and “statistical power,” have been applied through the SMS to program evaluations within criminal justice (Dodson, Cabage, & McMillan, 2019). This scale has also been used to evaluate interdisciplinary collaborations between criminal justice and other disciplines, such as education (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013) and neurobiology (Cornet, Kogel, Nijman, Raine, & Laan, 2015). The SMS has also been employed entirely within other disciplines, such as economics (Madaleno & Waights, n.d.) and public health (Day & Francisco, 2013).

¹Michigan State University supports the Bureau of Justice Administration’s Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) program for Project Safe Neighborhoods.

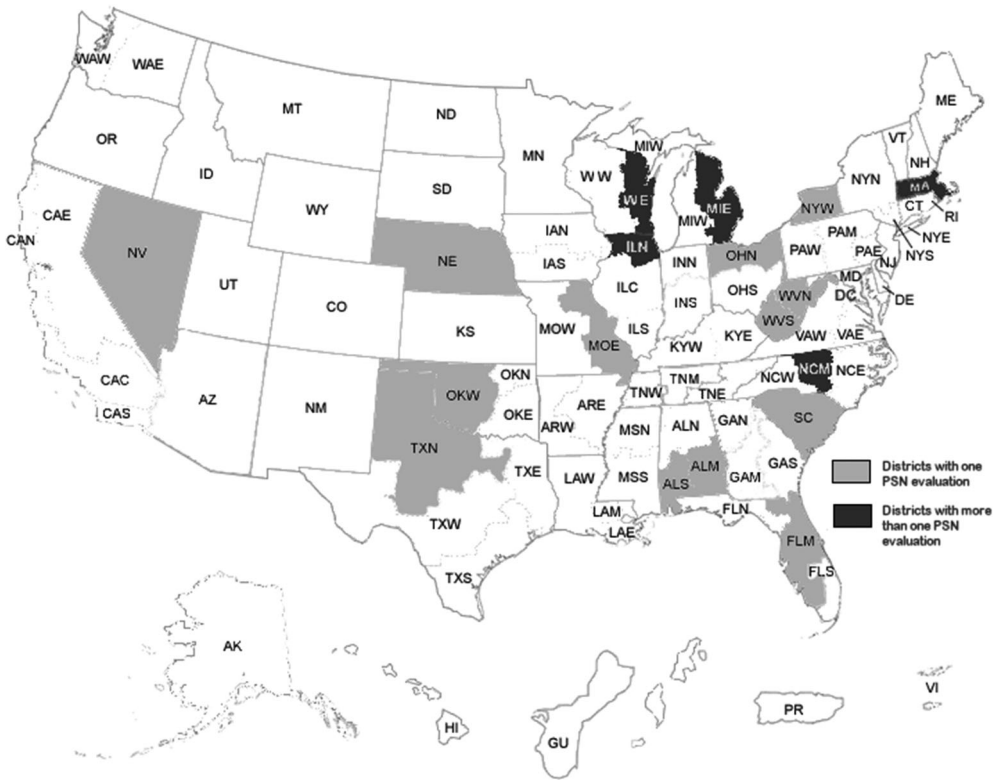


Figure 1. PSN evaluations by Federal District.

Three of the paper’s authors independently evaluated all 98 studies based on the guidelines provided by Sherman et al. (1998), assigning SMS scores to each study. These SMS scores, reported in the results section, were subjected to a test of inter-rater reliability. Those reliability estimates and their 95% confidence intervals were calculated using SPSS version 25 (IBM, Armonk, NY) based on a single rating ($k = 1$), consistency, two-way random effects model.² The resulting intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) is .986 ($F = 213.854^{***}$, 95% CI: [.980–.990]), reflecting excellent reliability (Koo & Li, 2016).

Twenty-one studies analyzed relevant empirical data and were assigned a score of 1 or greater, while the other 77 studies were excluded from further analysis. Of these 77 excluded studies, 51 PSN studies were assigned a score of 0 given they were either without an empirical component (e.g., systematic review or summary report), or the empirical component was solely qualitative or lacked any significance tests. The remaining 26 studies were excluded as they were not directly PSN-related but often examined other focused deterrence programs. Inter-reliability of SMS scores for the final 21 studies, which were scored by four of the current review’s authors, was calculated according to the previous method; the remaining ICC value is .727

²This method of calculating inter-rater reliability is derived from the work of McGraw and Wong (1996). This reporting format reflects the recommendations of Koo and Li (2016, p. 160). Values exceeding “0.75” reflect good reliability; values exceeding “0.90” represent excellent reliability (Koo & Li, 2016).

($F = 11.634^{***}$, 95% CI: [.539–.871]), which indicates moderate reliability (Koo & Li, 2016).

The small number of rigorous, compatible study designs that evaluated PSN interventions precludes the possibility of conducting a meta-analysis. Only one study employed a randomized experimental design.

Furthermore, many of the empirical studies we examined utilize interrupted time-series designs. At this time, there is no commonly accepted statistical method to synthesize effect sizes derived from that approach. While the body of literature reviewed in this systematic review is rich and informative, the lack of comparable research designs, presence of dissimilar outcome variables, and limitations in calculating effect sizes for non-experimental designs prevents us from conducting a meta-analysis at this time. Despite this limitation, we present and discuss original and alternative effect sizes from our sample to aid in quantifying the short-term effects of evaluated PSN interventions.

Findings

In examining the 21 studies, a geographic pattern became apparent. As [Figure 1](#) (and [Table 2](#)) illustrate, the studies retained by the systematic search are not evenly distributed by geographic region, with interventions in the Midwest (11) and South (9), as delineated by U.S. Census boundaries, producing more empirical studies than in the Northeast (4) and West (3). The clustering of empirical studies in the Midwest led us to construct a map which highlights the spatial distribution of reviewed studies (see [Figure 1](#)). While PSN programs have been implemented in all 94 federal districts (McGarrell et al., 2010; United States Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2021), most of the nation's districts have not yet produced publicly accessible empirical evaluations of PSN effects sufficient to earn an SMS score of 1 or higher, according to the results of this systematic search and the gaps demonstrated visually by [Figure 1](#). Note that some of the 21 studies evaluated target sites in multiple federal districts; all those districts are represented by [Figure 1](#).³

[Table 1](#) provides a list of each of the 21 retained PSN studies for the review along with the PSN district and time period under evaluation. The table describes each study's research design, evaluation sample data, and analytic procedures. Associated SMS scores that were coded based on study methodologies are also listed. The nature of PSN interventions used, measured outcomes, and results are summarized. Overall, the information provided in [Table 1](#) synthesizes key information for each of the 21 studies in addition to relevant qualitative findings observed by the research team.

Major effect sizes are reported in [Table 2](#). Due to incompatibility between study designs, the meta-analytic technique of synthesizing and analyzing standardized coefficients is not possible in this systematic review. Original effect sizes, in the form of percent change, ARIMA coefficients, and unstandardized coefficients from other analytic

³One study, McGarrell et al. (2010), is excluded from [Figure 1](#). That study compared violent crime trends across 252 cities with a population of at least 100,000, including 82 PSN treatment sites at varying dosages. While we consider this study to be a PSN evaluation for the purposes of this systematic review, we do not consider these 82 sites to have received a targeted evaluation of local effects like the other 20 retained studies.



Table 1. Project Safe Neighborhood (PSN) studies: 2001–present.

Study	District & Year	Measured Outcomes	PSN Interventions	Sample	Design	SMS	Results
Fox et al. (2021)	M.D. & S.D. Fla.; 2013–2015, 2016–2018	Violent crime, gun crime	Offender identification, retail deterrence, federal prosecution	Tampa Police Department is treatment (=1), 5 other agencies control conditions (=0)	Quasi-experimental (pre/post)	3	Violent crime ↓↓ Gun crime ↓↓
De Biasi, McGarrell, Krupa, and Circo (2019)	E.D. Mich.; 2017–2018	Fatal shootings, non-fatal shootings, total shootings	Offender identification, community engagement	5 years (2014–2018), then 8 quarters (Q1 2017–Q4 2018)	Quasi-experimental (pre/post; synthetic control group)	3	Fatal shootings ↑ Non-fatal shootings ↓↓ Total shootings ↓↓
Trinkner (2019)	N.D. Ill.; 2016–2017	Adherence to community norms, legitimacy perception of CJ system, motivation to stay out of prison, procedural justice from police, risk perception of certainty of capture	Offender notification forums	561 parolees	Between-group experiment, MANCOVA	3	Adherence ↑ Legitimacy ↑↑ Motivation ↑ Procedural justice ↑↑ Risk perception ↑↑
Grunwald and Papachristos (2017)	N.D. Ill.; 1999–2010	Homicide, gun homicide	Offender identification, offender notification forums	Panel dataset for all beats and their matched controls	Quasi-experimental panel	3	Homicide ↓↓, Gun homicide ↓↓ [only in original target areas]
Wallace, Papachristos, Meares, and Fagan (2016)	N.D. Ill.; Jan. 2002	Recidivism, time to reincarceration, risk of new offense, risk of technical violation	Offender notification forums	202 parolees (treatment) & 4018 people (control)	Quasi-experimental, Cox hazard models	3	Recidivism ↓↓, time to reincarceration ↑↑, risk of new offense ↓↓, risk of technical violation ↓↓
Bynum, Grommon, and McCluskey (2014)	E.D. Mich.; 2006–2007	Gunshot wounds	Offender identification	117 weekly observations [39 pre, 39 during, 39 post]	Quasi-experimental, ARIMA, OLS regression	3	Gunshot wounds ↓↓
Cook et al. (2015)	E.D. Wis.; 2009–2011	Earnings, employment, rearrest	Social services pre-release & work programs post-release for inmates	Male inmates to be released in 6 mos. (106 treatment, 130 control)	Randomized, controlled trial. OLS & Logit regression, survival analysis	5	Earnings ↑↑, Employment, ↑↑, Rearrest ↓↓

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Study	District & Year	Measured Outcomes	PSN Interventions	Sample	Design	SMS	Results
McGarrell et al. (2013)	Numerous cities; 2002–2009	Violent crime	Federal prosecution, offender identification, offender notification forums, community engagement	241 at-risk gang youth (81 female), 1438 AA 9th grade males, 25 reentry males	Surveys, interviews, HGLM, growth curve, propensity matching, ARIMA	4	Violent crime ↓ (only significant in one of 5 cities)
Hipple, Corsaro, and McGarrell (2011)	M.D.N.C.; 2004–2007	Violent crime	Offender identification, community engagement, offender notification forums	74 months (37 pre, 37 post)	ARIMA	3	Violent crime ↓
Barnes et al. (2010)	D.S.C.; Jan 2005	Firearm-related incident while on community supervision, time to firearm-related incident while on community supervision	Offender notification meetings	400 offenders on community supervision (200 treatment, 200 comparison)	Quasi-experimental (pre/post), logistic regression & survival analysis	3	Incident ↑↑, time to incident ↓
McGarrell et al. (2010)	U.S. cities >100k pop; 2002–2006	Violent crime	Federal prosecution, offender identification, offender notification, community engagement	Violent crimes in aggregate	HGLM, Growth Curve	4	Violent crime ↓↓
Braga, Pierce, McDevitt, Bond, and Cronin (2008)	D. Mass.; Oct 2002	Gun homicide and aggravated assault	Offender notification meetings, offender identification, retail deterrence, community engagement	120 months	Quasi-experimental, Poisson, Negative Binomial, Max likelihood regression	3	Gun homicide and aggravated assault ↓↓
Decker, Huebner, Watkins, and Green (2007)	E.D. Mo.; 2002–2005	Federal prosecutions, aggravated assault, firearm-involved robbery, homicide, weapons incidents, shots fired calls for service, community awareness of PSN	Offender identification, offender notification	11 quarters	Quasi-experimental (pre/post)	3	Aggravated assault ↓, firearm-involved robbery ↓, homicide ↓, weapons incidents ↓, shots-fired calls for service ↑

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Study	District & Year	Measured Outcomes	PSN Interventions	Sample	Design	SMS	Results
Haas and Turley (2007)	N.D. & S.D. W.Va.; 2003–2005	Perception of increased punishment certainty, perception of increased punishment severity, firearm offenses, domestic violence victimization	Retail deterrence, federal prosecution	778 respondents & official crime data	Quasi-experimental (pre/post)	3	Perception of certainty ↓↓, perception of severity ↑, firearm offenses ↑, domestic violence victimization ↓
Hipple et al. (2007)	S.D. Ala.; 2001–2006	Total gun crime, violent gun crime, gun homicide, gun robbery, gun assaults, gun sex crime, gun menacing crimes, gunshot trauma admissions	Retail deterrence, offender identification, federal prosecution, community engagement	UCR & police data, crime mapping, gun tracing, incident reviews, community surveys	ARIMA	3	Total gun crime ↓↓, violent gun crime ↓↓, gun homicide ↓, gun robbery ↓↓, gun assaults ↓↓, gun sex crime ↑, gun menacing crimes ↓, gunshot trauma admissions ↓↓
Hipple et al. (2007)	M.D. N.C.; 2002–2005	Gun crime	Retail deterrence, offender identification, federal prosecution, offender notification, community engagement	Police crime information, GIS	ARIMA	3	Gun crime ↓ [only significant in two of four cities]
Hipple et al. (2007)	D. Neb.; 2003–2005	Assault, robbery, homicide, total firearm offenses	Retail deterrence, offender identification, federal prosecution, offender notification, community engagement	UCR, crime mapping, gun tracing, incident reviews, community surveys	ARIMA	3	Assault ↓, robbery ↓, homicide ↑, total firearm offenses ↓↓
McDevitt, Braga, and Cronin (2007)	D. Mass.; Oct 2002	Gun aggravated assault	Offender identification, offender notification meetings, retail deterrence, community engagement, federal prosecution	UCR data	Pre/post	3	Gun aggravated assault ↓
McGarrell, Hipple, and Corsaro (2007)	M.D. Ala.; May 2002	Assault with a firearm, homicide	Federal prosecution, retail deterrence, community engagement	Alabama Criminal Justice Information Center data	ARIMA	3	Assault with a firearm ↓↓, homicide ↓

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Study	District & Year	Measured Outcomes	PSN Interventions	Sample	Design	SMS	Results
Papachristos et al. (2007)	N.D. Ill.; 2002–2004	Homicide, gun homicide	Retail deterrence, offender notification, federal prosecution	24 treatment & 30 comparison beats	Quasi-experimental panel; growth curve model	4	Homicide ↓↓, gun homicide ↓↓
Katz et al. (2005)	Nev.; 2002–2004	Cases dropped, incarceration rate, prison sentence length	Creation of county-level prosecutorial gun unit	692 prosecutorial gun crime cases	Quasi-experimental (pre/post; comparison)	3	Cases dropped ↓↓, incarceration rate ↑↑, sentence length ↑

Key: For the results column, two arrows (↓↓ or ↑↑) indicate statistical significance and the direction of the relationship, one arrow (↓ or ↑) indicates non-significance and the direction of the relationship.



Table 2. Effect sizes of Project Safe Neighborhood (PSN) studies: 2001–present.

Study	Measured Outcomes	Original Effect Size			Alternative Effect Size	Significance	+/-
		Percent change	ARIMA coef. (s.e.)	Other coef. (s.e.) ²			
Fox et al. (2021)	Violent crime ¹	-	-	-1.23 (0.13)	71% lower odds	<0.001	+
De Biasi et al. (2019)	Gun crime ¹	-	-	-0.64 (0.26)	48% lower odds	<0.01	+
Trinkner (2019) ³	Total shootings	-19.00%	-	-	5.77 fewer per quarter	<0.05	+
Grunwald and Papachristos (2017)	Adherence to community norms	-	-	0.001		NS (0.650)	+
	Legitimacy perception of criminal justice system	-	-	0.02		0.007	+
	Motivation to stay out of prison	-	-	0.001		NS (0.531)	+
	Procedural justice from police	-	-	0.03		0.001	+
	Risk perception of certainty of capture in reoffending	-	-	0.02		0.016	+
Wallace et al. (2016)	Homicide (core area)	-	-	-1.41 (0.46)		0.002	+
	Gun homicide (core area)	-	-	-1.06 (0.43)		0.014	+
	Homicide (expansion area) ⁴	-	-	-0.05 (0.40)		NS (0.907)	+
	Gun homicide (expansion area) ⁴	-	-	-0.29 (0.39)		NS (0.463)	+
Bynum et al. (2014)	Overall recidivism within neighborhood ⁵	-	-	-0.84 (0.10)	Recidivism hazard is 56.9% less	<0.01	+
	Overall recidivism between neighborhood	-	-	-0.85 (0.10)	Recidivism hazard is 57.3% less	<0.01	+
	Gunshot wounds	-	-	-1.02 ⁶	1 fewer per week	<0.05	+
Cook et al. (2015)	Earnings	-	-	408 (172)	Increased earnings \$400 per quarter	<0.05	+
	Employment	-	-	0.198 (0.057)	20% more likely to be employed	<0.01	+
	Rearrest	-	-	-		<0.01	+

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Study	Measured Outcomes	Original Effect Size		Alternative Effect Size	Significance	+/-
		Percent change	ARIMA coef. (s.e.)			
McGarrell et al. (2013)	Violent crime (Cleveland)	-	-0.180 (0.119)	-0.494 (0.187)	Reduces the probability of arrest 39%	+
	Violent crime (Dallas)	-	-0.292 (0.072)	-	0.2 fewer per month	+
	Violent crime (Milwaukee)	-	-0.238 (0.145)	-	0.32 fewer per month	+
	Violent crime (Oklahoma City)	-	-3.56 (2.46)	-	0.23 fewer per month	+
	Violent crime (Rochester)	-	-0.141 (0.087)	-	3.52 fewer per month	+
Hipple et al. (2011)	Violent crime	-	-0.075 (0.041)	-	0.17 fewer per month	+
Barnes et al. (2010)	Drug and nuisance offenses	-	-0.056 (0.034)	-	0.08 fewer per month	+
	Firearm-related incident while on community supervision	-	-	3.24 (1.95)	0.06 fewer per month ~3 times more likely involved in firearm incident	+
McGarrell et al. (2010)	Time to firearm-related incident while on community supervision	-	-	2.76 (1.63)	Hazard to re-offending is 176% higher	-
	Violent crime by PSN dosage	-	-	-0.06 (0.03)	Every unit increase in PSN dosage reduce crime rate by 5.7%	+
	Violent crime by PSN treatment	-	-	-0.03 (0.004)	PSN treatment cities experienced 2.4% annual reduction in violent crime	+
Braga et al. (2008)	Gun homicide and aggravated assault	-	-	-0.56 (0.19)	43.1% decrease in the monthly number	+
	Federal prosecutions ⁸	-	-	-	~1 fewer per quarter	+
	Aggravated assault	-	-	-	~1 fewer per quarter	+
	Firearm-involved robbery	-	-6.57%	-	~1 fewer per year	+
	Homicide	-	-15.96%	-	~1.5 fewer per quarter	+
Decker et al. (2007)	Weapons incidents	-	-34.44%	-	63 more per month	+
	Shots fired calls for service	-	+35%	-		+
	Community awareness of PSN ¹¹	-	-	-		+

(continued)



Table 2. Continued.

Study	Measured Outcomes	Original Effect Size			Alternative Effect Size	Significance	+/-
		Percent change	ARIMA coef. (s.e.)	Other coef. (s.e.) ²			
Haas and Turley (2007)	Perception of increased punishment certainty ¹²	+21.15%	-	-		Varying, mostly NS ¹²	+
	Perception of increased punishment severity ¹³	+10.8%	-	-		NS	-
	Firearm offenses ¹⁴	-18.73%	-	-		NS	+
Hipple et al. (2007) [Ala.] ¹⁶	Domestic violence victimization ¹⁵	-	-26	-	Decreased 26 incidents per month	<0.05	+
	Total gun crime	-	-16	-	Decreased 16 incidents per month	<0.05	+
	Violent gun crime	-	-0.027	-	Decreased 11 incidents per month	NS	+
Hipple et al. (2007) [N.C.]	Gun homicide	-	-0.11	-	Decreased 2 incidents per month	<0.05	+
	Gun robbery	-	-0.11	-	Decreased 2 incidents per month	<0.05	+
	Gun assaults	-	-2.57	-	8 fewer per month	NS	+
	Gun sex crime	-	0.139	-	13 fewer per month	<0.01	+
	Gun menacing crimes	-	-6	-	0.45 fewer per month	NS	+
	Gunshot trauma admissions	-	-2	-	9 fewer per month	<0.01	+
Hipple et al. (2007) [Neb.]	Gun crime (Durham) (Ln)	-	-0.11 (0.07)	-	22 fewer per month	NS (0.760)	+
	Gun crime (Greensboro) (Ln)	-	-0.20 (0.07)	-	0.6 fewer per month	NS (0.490)	+
	Gun crime (Salisbury) (Ln)	-	-0.44 (0.56)	-	0.02 more per month	NS (0.957)	+
	Gun crime (Winston-Salem)	-	-8.99 (0.01)	-	16 fewer per month	0.003	+
McDevitt et al. (2007)	Assault	-	-0.37 (1.2)	-	1 fewer per month	NS	+
	Robbery	-	-3.4 (4.9)	-			
McGarrell et al. (2007)	Homicide	-	0.01 (0.34)	-			
	Total firearm offenses (ln)	-	-0.23 (0.08)	-			
Papachristos et al. (2007)	Gun aggravated assault	-	-28.02%	-			
	Assault with firearm	-	-3.29 (1.6)	-	3 fewer per month	0.038	+
Papachristos et al. (2007)	Homicide	-	-0.56 (0.36)	-	0.56 fewer per month	NS (0.116)	+
	Homicide	-	-	-0.124 (0.032)	12% quarterly decline	<0.001	+
	Gun homicide	-	-	-	13% quarterly decline	<0.001	+

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Study	Measured Outcomes	Original Effect Size			Alternative Effect Size	Significance	+/-
		Percent change	ARIMA coef. (s.e.)	Other coef. (s.e.) ²			
Katz et al. (2005)	Cases dropped ¹⁷	-52.27%	-	-0.134 (0.032)		<0.05	+
	Incarceration rate ¹⁷	+62.9%	-	-		<0.05	+
	Prison sentence length ¹⁷	+6.06 to +23.7%	-	-		NS	+

¹Reported coefficients are from post-test 1. Indicated effectiveness declined at post-test 2 and post-test 3. For gun crime, this reached non-significance at post-test 3.
²No significance testing is reported, but this significance is presumed to be <0.05, since the total effect (in the synthetic control model) is significant at the 0.05 level, and the slight increase in fatal shootings is insignificant.
³Univariate (*F*-test) results are reported here, although the authors did perform a multivariate analysis with motivation to stay out of prison as the dependent variable (see page 679). The effect size is the eta-squared.
⁴In this study, "expansion area" refers to two districts PSN was expanded to cover during the intervention. These results indicate that this PSN intervention was effective in the original target area but was ineffective in expansion districts. The authors explore reasons for this difference in pages 154 through 156 of that study.
⁵Recidivism by crime type is also explored (page 1257) but is excluded from this table in the interest of space. Furthermore, the coefficients reported here are from the "between-neighborhood" model, but a competing, "within-neighborhood" is also analyzed.
⁶Model fit slightly exceeds 0.05 bounds and standard error is not reported, but the four control districts had no significant decline in shootings, leading the authors to cautiously interpret this intervention as successful in reducing shootings.
⁷Violent crime also significantly declined in the rest of Dallas during this time: Coeff. = -0.252 (0.055), *p* < 0.01
⁸These data are not compared to pre-intervention data or data from comparison sites, so the impact of PSN on this outcome cannot be interpreted.
⁹No significance testing was reported, but percent reduction was greater in contiguous and/or control sites.
¹⁰No significance testing was reported, but the authors believe this increase in calls for service is due to increased awareness of gun crime during the PSN intervention. We code this outcome as "+" (desired) based on this interpretation.
¹¹No data were collected prior to the intervention, so the effect of this PSN intervention on community perceptions of gun availability, gun crime penalties, and PSN awareness cannot be interpreted.
¹²Several percentages were reported which, to the authors of the original study, indicated an ineffective media campaign. People exposed to PSN did not consistently report a perceived increase in perceptions of punishment certainty compared to people who were not exposed to PSN across treatment and comparison areas. See the table on page 21 of that study for more detail.
¹³This percentage change is drawn from subtracting the % of people who perceived increases in the control group from the % of people who perceived increases in the treatment group.
¹⁴This percentage change is drawn from the "Southern Core," where gun violence reduction was the stated focus.
¹⁵This percentage change is drawn from the "North", where domestic violence reduction was the stated focus.
¹⁶Standard errors were not reported alongside ARIMA coefficients in this study, so significance values cannot be confirmed.
¹⁷Percent change in this study was calculated by subtracting the average difference between treatment unit and comparison unit across three reported crime types. This study did not include sufficient statistical tests so these effect sizes should be interpreted with caution.

designs, are reported in this table to quantify the size of significant reductions reported in Table 1. Alternative effect sizes, such as those derived from odds ratios or mean differences within the target site between pre- and post- conditions, are also reported to make effect size comparisons possible across some of the studies regardless of design. Insignificant effect sizes are reported as “NS,” with values at or below $p=0.05$ considered to be statistically significant. Finally, a +/– column is presented to indicate whether each outcome was influenced in a desired “+” direction (i.e., PSN reduced crime) or undesired “–” direction (i.e., PSN increased crime).

Of the 65 major outcomes assessed in the 21 studies and presented in Table 2, effect sizes could be drawn from 62 (95.4%). Of those 62 effect sizes, 57 (91.9%) were influenced by PSN in the desired “+” direction, while 5 (8.1%) were influenced in the undesired “–” direction. Of the 57 desired outcomes, 31 (54.4%) attained statistical significance while 26 (45.6%) were statistically insignificant. Of the 5 undesired outcomes, 1 attained statistical significance (Barnes, Kurlychek, Miller, Miller, & Kaminski, 2010) while 4 were insignificant.⁴

Violent crime was measured in 42 (64.6%) of the 65 outcomes we analyzed from the 21 studies. Among these, 26 effect sizes were converted into an alternative effect size: monthly reductions in crime, which ranged from the lowest reduction of .02 crimes per month (homicide in Cleveland, McGarrell et al., 2013) to the highest reduction of 26 per month (total gun crime; Hipple, Frabutt, Corsaro, & McGarrell, 2007 [Ala.]). This wide variation is partially attributable to the range of violent crimes measured across jurisdictions of varying sizes. The lowest reduction rates are expected for rare events like homicide in smaller-population areas. The highest reduction rates are expected for broader categories of offending, like total gun crime or total violent crime in larger-population areas. The highest incidence reduction, (Hipple et al., 2007 [Ala.]), resulted from a PSN intervention titled “Operation Ice” in Mobile, Alabama, beginning in April 2002. This reduction of 26 total gun crimes per month in the Southern District of Alabama was observed through August 2006.

Other alternative effect sizes are presented in Table 2, such as studies which reported effect size using percentage reductions, which also suggest minor to moderate short-term, desired impacts of PSN on intended crime targets. One nationwide study (McGarrell et al., 2010) analyzed the effects of PSN across 252 of the largest U.S. cities, including 82 PSN treatment sites. This study indicates a marginal (2.4%) reduction in violent crime in PSN treatment sites compared to non-PSN treatment sites.

The information highlighted in Tables 1 and 2 was used to create descriptive summaries of key characteristics across the 21 studies. Table 3 presents summary characteristics for SMS scores, main PSN interventions, and PSN outcomes. Of the 21 studies retained by the systematic search, most (81.0%) earned an SMS score of 3. Four studies (19.0%) exceed that threshold, using more rigorous designs to earn SMS values of 4, or 5. The methods employed in those studies nullified more threats to internal validity, such as growth curve modeling and synthetic control methods. The single study rated as 5 (4.8%) accounted for selection bias using random assignment of PSN interventions (i.e., treatment conditions).

⁴Statistical significance and magnitude of the effect are related, yet separate concepts. See section “Geographic Gaps, Content Gaps, and a Lack of PSN Evaluations” for a more detailed discussion of this distinction.

Table 3. Descriptive characteristics of PSN evaluation studies, $n = 21$; Effect sizes $N = 62$.

Note: not all categories are mutually exclusive	n (%)
<i>SMS</i>	
3	17 (81.0)
4	3 (14.3)
5	1 (4.8)
<i>Census region: (% of U.S. pop.)</i>	
Midwest (20.8%)	11 (52.4)
Northeast (17.1%)	4 (19.0)
South (38.3%)	9 (42.9)
West (23.9%)	3 (14.3)
<i>Main PSN interventions</i>	
Community outreach	9 (42.9)
Federal prosecution	9 (42.9)
Retail deterrence	8 (38.1)
Offender notification meetings & forums	11 (52.4)
Offender identification	12 (57.1)
<i>Measured outcome</i>	
Gun crime	14 (66.7)
Violent crime	8 (38.1)
Perceptions	3 (14.3)
Prosecutorial outcomes	2 (9.5)
Recidivism	3 (14.3)
Other	3 (14.3)
<i>Summary of effect sizes</i>	
Significant desired effect	31 (50.0)
Insignificant desired effect	26 (41.9)
Insignificant undesired effect	4 (6.5)
Significant undesired effect	1 (1.6)

Common interventions and tactics reported in prior literature are also summarized. The counts (n) and corresponding percentages reported in Table 3 reflect which interventions were the primary focus of each analysis. Note that several of these categories are not mutually exclusive, as all PSN working groups applied multiple interventions and most evaluated multiple categories of crime. Collaborative case reviews were frequently conducted, allowing PSN stakeholders to identify high-risk offenders (57.1%) and conduct offender notification meetings and forums (52.4%). These forms of specific deterrence targeted high-risk re-offenders or parolees and probationers at large within jurisdictions plagued by high levels of gun violence. Enhanced federal prosecution efforts were frequently employed (42.9%), increasing deterrence and incapacitating more people for longer periods of time. The integration of pro-social community groups (e.g., faith-based organizations, social services, schools) was a common focus (42.9%). Media campaigns advertising federal, legal penalties for gun violence, drug crime, and gang involvement, known as retail deterrence, also appeared in many (38.1%) of reviewed studies. Although not captured in tabular form, it is also worth noting that several PSN programs employed enhanced law enforcement street presence and increased supervision of probationers or parolees.

The outcomes measured by each of the 21 studies are also reported in Table 3. Most (66.7%) used a form of gun crime as a dependent variable. Some of these studies relied on shots-fired calls for service data while others examined fatal and non-fatal shooting incident counts. Eight (38.1%) studies analyzed violent crimes. Some of these explored overall rates of violent crime; others examined specific forms of interpersonal violence, such as robbery and assault. Two studies (9.5%) focused on prosecutorial

outcomes, such as case closure rates and sentence length. Community and offender perceptions of procedural justice, gun accessibility, sanctions for violent crime, and PSN interventions at large were studied in three (14.3%) studies. Three other studies (14.3%) primarily evaluated recidivism, and three studies (14.3%) incorporated additional outcome variables, such as earnings and employment post-release (Cook, Kang, Braga, Ludwig, & O'Brien, 2015).

Finally, Table 3 summarizes the +/- column from Table 2, indicating that PSN had a statistically significant, intended impact on exactly half of evaluated outcomes. A further 41.9% of effects were in the desired direction but did not attain statistical significance. Five (8.1%) outcomes seemed to have been influenced in an undesired direction by PSN interventions. Only one (1.6%) of these effects attained statistical significance (Barnes et al., 2010).

Discussion

Project Safe Neighborhoods, an evidence-based, interdisciplinary initiative, has doled out billions of dollars in grants across the United States (McGarrell et al., 2010). Although researchers have comprehensively summarized individual PSN projects (e.g., McGarrell et al., 2021), efforts to systematically synthesize and collate the collective body of literature have yet to be undertaken. This paper aims to explore the existing body of Project Safe Neighborhoods evaluations and address that gap. While this systematic search produced an insufficient number of rigorous, comparable empirical designs to employ meta-analytic statistical methods, enough studies were discovered to identify patterns, make reasonable inferences, and identify gaps for future evaluators to consider.

Rigor of PSN Evaluations

A noteworthy finding of this systematic review is that many of the currently available reports and evaluations of PSN effectiveness do not meet the baseline SMS 3 criteria for interpretability, as recommended by Cook and Campbell (1979). Most of the studies we uncovered during our search do not include both a treatment group (e.g., PSN target site) and a control or appropriate comparison group (e.g., non-PSN neighborhoods, a different city) and many rely solely on an analysis of pre-post descriptive statistics within a PSN intervention area, failing to account for serious threats to internal validity. Numerous studies and reports were excluded from this systematic review for failing to perform even basic statistical-difference testing between pre- and post-treatment conditions or across control and treatment neighborhoods.

While each study covered by this systematic review made unique and valuable contributions to our shared understanding of PSN programs, future evaluators should strive to employ research designs which allow for clear statistical comparisons between as many treatment sites and comparable units of analysis as possible. Effect sizes must be calculated whenever possible.

Additionally, while the gold-standard research design of random assignment for some mechanisms of PSN might be impractical or unethical, the single "SMS 5"-graded

study included in this systematic review shows that, given PSN's broad range of interventions and applications across the United States, it is possible to execute randomized controlled trials (RCT) on some components of this program. The RCT experimental design is broadly held to be a top-tier approach within the social sciences, as it has the potential to eliminate the most common and serious threats to internal validity when executed correctly. Even in contexts when performing an RCT design is impossible, evaluators of PSN programs still have more rigorous options available to them than designs which fail to offer controls or appropriate comparison groups, especially given recent advances in the understanding and application of quasi-experimental research designs and techniques like propensity score matching or synthetic control models.

PSN Interventions and Crime Targets

Common PSN interventions described in official sources were frequently observed across the reviewed studies, such as case screening to identify highest-risk offenders, offender notification meetings and forums, deterrent marketing campaigns, enhanced federal prosecution, and community outreach initiatives. While only two of these interventions were a focus in a majority of reviewed programs (offender identification occurred most, at 57.1%; [Table 3](#)), this is expected given the uniquely tailored nature of PSN interventions, per the initiative's design. For example, offender identification may not be an appropriate primary focus in a context of widespread firearm proliferation and decentralized gang activity. Nor would community outreach be a high-priority intervention in a neighborhood context in which police-community relations are already positive and productive. This low percentage is also expected given how we chose to only consider an intervention technique to be a "focus" if the evaluation in question discussed and analyzed that intervention in any depth. This was a subjective decision that may not accurately reflect the extent to which any particular intervention was prioritized by the task force.

Most of the studies we reviewed evaluated violent crime, especially gun crime ([Table 3](#)), as the main outcomes of PSN initiatives. While all 21 evaluations intended to analyze crime reduction, some of the studies we reviewed focused on indirect interventions that merited different outcome variables, such as criminal justice system efficiency, drug crime, juvenile delinquency, or recidivism. Like the resulting counts of main PSN interventions, the measured outcomes we observed were unremarkable and expected, based on the stated design and intentions of PSN and the findings of prior literature.

Geographic Gaps, Content Gaps, and a Lack of PSN Evaluations

While population is not distributed evenly across all four U.S. Census regions, and therefore neither are potential PSN program sites and research partners, the geographic gaps present in the body of studies we reviewed merit attention. With only 21 studies retained across 94 federal districts, the map presented in [Figure 1](#) was bound to have substantial visible gaps regardless of study distribution, even though some studies

examined PSN target sites across multiple districts. The observed clustering of evaluations, however, illustrates just how many of the country's high-population centers, like those present in Texas, New York, California, and Washington, have not yet been served by any publicly accessible empirical evaluation of PSN despite two decades of nationwide programming and funding. Within the numerous empty federal districts within [Figure 1](#), many of the nation's largest and highest-crime cities, counties, and states are entirely unrepresented by the literature we were able to locate and review.

The 94 distinct districts which compose this map reflect a nation with a great deal of geographic, socioeconomic, and political diversity. Therefore, it would be unreasonable to assume that the results of PSN evaluations in just a few locations could be generalized to sufficiently represent the whole body of nationwide program effectiveness. While PSN interventions across the country draw from a consistent set of theoretical, legal, and normative frameworks, the strategy of how exactly to spend money and reduce crime in each district is unique to the context of each PSN target site. The allocation of resources and targets of each PSN project are left to the discretion of a wide array of stakeholders within each federal district. If more sites were empirically reviewed, it would likely improve our discipline's ability to confidently generalize and characterize the value of Project Safe Neighborhoods. In this regard, the RTI International and Justice Research and Statistics Association in-progress national evaluation of PSN programs and outcomes is noteworthy (RTI International, 2021).

Perhaps more importantly, such empirical research would guide us towards which lessons should be learned and applied moving forward in policymaking. For example, offender notification forums, community outreach programs, and the concentration of researchers, strategists, practitioners, federal judges, and other resources into high-priority crime targets all appear to be valuable, successful strategies for criminal justice agencies to consider. A larger body of evaluated PSN interventions would give future PSN programs more data to draw from, in keeping with the stated goals of PSN. A true long-term cost-benefit analysis for the benefit of budget and results-focused criminal justice actors and policymakers cannot yet be conducted based on the relatively sparse literature examined in this systematic review. Often, these long-term intervention effects are not studied at all, and only immediate short-term impacts are analyzed. Some literature indicates that treatment effects wane in a matter of months (Fox, Allen, & Toth, 2021), though more research on long-term effects is needed so the longer-term benefits of PSN investment can be assessed more definitively.

Furthermore, several critical mechanisms of PSN effectiveness have gone untested. While focused deterrence research and the body of studies we reviewed provide cautiously encouraging findings and some of these studies explore causal mechanisms, the specific impacts of many common PSN components are still largely unknown. What correlates enhance or mitigate the deterrent threat of federal prosecution? Are high-risk offenders intimidated into compliance by offender notification forums, or do these settings have an integrative, pro-social characteristic that drives crime reduction? Do PSN programs displace violence, and if not, how are the lives of high-risk offenders and the broader community affected by effective interagency responses to violence? Do perceptions of criminal justice system legitimacy improve when a PSN program has a significant impact on gun violence?

Qualitative approaches have a role to play in demystifying the effects of PSN interventions. Interviews may be conducted of high-risk offenders to assess the deterrent impact of federal prosecutorial resources, retail deterrence measures, and other core components of many PSN interventions. Content analyses of offender notification forums may be warranted to identify the most effective strategies in informing and deterring high-risk offenders. Incorporating survey instruments which assess perceptions of safety, police legitimacy, and quality of life in the target neighborhood would help PSN evaluators move beyond crime statistics to explore the holistic impact of PSN on the communities its practitioners endeavor to protect. The current standard of evaluating PSN interventions based on pre/post-tests of crime statistics may indicate whether PSN has reduced crime, but this evaluative approach tells us very little about the value of each mechanism or how the community at large is affected.

In addition to our hope for greater depth, we expected a longer list of empirical studies as the Department of Justice encourages PSN programs to incorporate a dedicated research partner into the working group and the fact that PSN funds have been allocated for 20 years (United States Department of Justice, n.d.). Research partners and scholars who have access to relevant data should attempt to conduct scientific evaluations of PSN programs whenever possible, given tens of millions of dollars in expenditures per fiscal year on these interventions and the broad range of potential implications for criminal justice policy inherent to these strategies. Project Safe Neighborhoods sites are the target of uniquely tailored approaches which seek to address some of the most pressing and high-profile crime problems in the United States. Successes and failures within this more-experimental setting of criminal justice practice could have broad-ranging implications for the future of a more effective and just legal system, provided that the requisite empirical studies are performed and made available to the peer review process. A dearth of research into this popular initiative represents a significant gap in policing research that deserves to be addressed.

Characterization of PSN Effectiveness

Given a small percentage of individuals are responsible for a disproportionately high number of offenses (Baglivio, Jackowski, Greenwald, & Howell, 2014; Moffitt, 2006; Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972), focused deterrence approaches such as the “pulling-levers” strategies employed by PSN programs will always have some solid theoretical ground upon which to operate. The current body of literature around that framework favors this more targeted approach, and most evaluations retained in this paper’s systematic search suggest that PSN interventions are more effective than the status quo in addressing high-priority crime problems (see “Results” column, Table 1). While we did not discover enough compatible studies to attempt a meta-analysis, these studies contributed valuable insights.

Due to the lack of a meta-analytical component, this systematic review should not be interpreted as drawing any definitive conclusions about the overall effectiveness of PSN programs. We believe it would be accurate, however, to characterize the current body of literature surrounding both the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of PSN as favorable at this time.

This favorable characterization of PSN is based, in part, on our interpretation of the “Results” column presented in [Table 1](#) and the effect sizes reported in [Table 2](#) which are summarized in [Table 3](#), the majority (91.9%) of which affected PSN in the desired direction. Around half (54.5%) of these desired effects attained statistical significance.

These findings should not be interpreted to suggest that all 31 significant desired effects reflect high magnitude improvements over the status quo, and the 26 insignificant desired effects only reflect marginal improvements. Our categorization of “significant” is based on statistical significance. This distinction is useful because it indicates findings for which researchers have a greater deal of confidence, but it should not be conflated with effect size and as such, both are reported and analyzed. The ability to determine with confidence whether an effect is statistically significant is related to statistical power, which is limited in many PSN evaluations by small sample sizes,⁵ as is typical for serious violent crime at the neighborhood or city-level.

Some of the studies which indicated significant desired effects, such as McGarrell et al. (2010), indicate only marginal effectiveness (2.4% reduction in violent crimes compared to non-PSN sites during the same time period). Statistical significance in this study is attained from high statistical power, due in part to a sample size of all violent crime across 252 cities over several years. On the other hand, some studies which present insignificant desired effects, such as Hipple et al. (2007, [N.C.]), indicate potentially greater effectiveness despite not reaching statistical significance (8 fewer gun crimes per month in Durham, NC). Statistical significance was not achieved, in part, because this study is limited in statistical power by the relative rarity of gun crime in this city. As such, statistical significance and effect size should be considered separately when analyzing the effects of PSN.

Our favorable interpretation of PSN is influenced by this body of effect sizes indicating that PSN reduces crime, at least in the short-term, although many of these effects are small and may not persist in the long-term. Assessing whether PSN interventions provide a worthwhile return on investment is a more challenging question due to a relative paucity of PSN evaluations, especially those using longer post-intervention data.

Despite this lack of data, consider an extremely simplified cost-benefit analysis comparing the annual cost of gun violence to PSN spending. The cost of gun crime in the United States is estimated to exceed \$200 billion annually (Follman, Lee, Lurie, & West, 2018). Given this figure, even marginal reductions in gun violence rates, such as those observed throughout the evaluations we reviewed, could reflect a financially successful program since PSN expenditures are small by comparison (<\$100 million annually; U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance, n.d.). In time, with a better understanding of PSN effectiveness, empirical cost-benefit analyses can be performed to more definitively state whether PSN is a worthwhile long-term investment.

⁵Decisions made by researchers also influence statistical power and the ability to detect significant impacts of a criminal justice intervention like PSN. The chosen statistical test, desired significance level, and preference for a directional or nondirectional research hypothesis all influence statistical power, not just sample size. Studies with low statistical power have a higher risk of leading researchers to commit type II error—falsely retaining the null hypothesis by failing to detect significant impacts of the intervention. For more information on effect size, statistical power, and their application in criminal justice evaluations, see Britt and Weisburd (2010).

Commonalities of Successful PSN Interventions

It is probable that many of the same factors which PSN-involved practitioners and scholars have identified to be common pitfalls to the mission of reducing crime are likewise prevalent obstacles to the academic mission of evaluating these programs. Commonly identified characteristics of successful and unsuccessful PSN programs from previous literature were explored in this systematic review, though they were not quantified within the results section due to inconsistent discussion of such obstacles across the 21 retained studies.

Nevertheless, we observed patterns in the literature which aligned with those found in previous studies. PSN working groups which avoid personnel turnover, maintain consistent communication through regular meetings, exhibit strong leadership and buy-in from all involved parties, and quickly agree on priorities for the PSN program are reasonably considered to have a greater likelihood of achieving desirable goals (Roehl et al., 2008; U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). PSN sites which suffer from constant turnover of leadership, irregular meeting schedules, and a lack of shared vision and cohesion between federal, state, local agencies, research partners, and the community, represent serious obstacles to successful program implementation, according to prior literature and the studies examined in this systematic review (Bynum & McCluskey, 2007; McGarrell et al., 2013).

PSN appears, at least to those involved in PSN working groups, to function substantially better when organizational skill and leadership abound. Prior studies of PSN programs and other interagency settings affirm that consistent communication and skilled leadership is required to forge strong working relationships between the criminal-legal apparatuses which need to cooperate to achieve a successful intervention (Roehl et al., 2008; McGarrell et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). This likely holds just as true with research partners who need to be allowed to collect and review data before, during, and after PSN interventions are conducted, working closely with a stable, bought-in, transparent team of criminal justice personnel, which need to cooperate to produce a complete scientific evaluation. When personnel turnover occurs, buy-in is inconsistent, leadership is scant, and PSN money is directed without consistent goals and high-level strategy, prior literature and the evaluations examined in this review indicate that the likelihood for achieving the goals of both criminal justice and scientific inquiry is low.

Three focal areas have been identified in this review as priorities for successful PSN task forces: approach, partnerships, and communication. Task forces which focus on refining their approach capitalize on each agency's knowledge and resources. Successful refinement of a task force's approach involves maintaining a collaborative environment, adaptable to the community context, in which data is promptly shared, and the power of U.S. Attorneys' Offices is leveraged to enhance the severity, certainty, and swiftness of sanctions within the target neighborhood.

The second core strategy, partnerships, reflects the incorporation of all relevant community pillars into the task force. Community activists, victim advocates, school system employees, religious leaders, and local business leaders all have a part to play in improving community safety. Task forces which only consider the priorities and leverage the resources of federal, state, and local criminal justice agencies risk creating

or amplifying a rift between the community and its law enforcement agencies, to the detriment of community safety. Incorporating pro-social pillars from the community is, in our estimation, an underutilized strategy in the application of focused deterrence strategies.

Finally, the third focal area for task forces is communication. Successful PSN practitioners convey clearly to offenders, through a combination of retail deterrence and offender notification meetings and forums, that violence reduction is a top priority, high-risk offenders have been thoroughly studied, and all available levers will be pulled to render the neighborhood safe. Task forces accomplish this by presenting to offenders all evidence compiled against them, comprehensive data collected on the violence issue, and the exact levers task forces can pull to address the violence.

Conclusion: Future Directions

Criminal justice researchers have a critical role to fill in this process and blame for the relative dearth of evaluation research in this field should not fall solely on agencies. Currently, not enough scholars have been trained and incentivized to execute high-quality evaluation research across the scope of criminal justice institutions and interventions. Despite this, opportunities for partnerships between practitioners and researchers have expanded substantially over the past two decades (Laub & Frisch, 2016). Researchers must take advantage of these growing opportunities by applying their expertise to evaluate innovative approaches to criminal justice like PSN.

To achieve evidence-based, measurable outcomes, research partners should get involved at the earliest stages to help the PSN task force design their action plan. The concept of SMS needs to be introduced and accepted by the local PSN task force, so they understand that the action plan should meet the SMS-3 baseline standard. While randomized experimental design is not always feasible in implementing PSN initiatives, the local task forces may consider utilizing quasi-experimental designs with rigorous comparison groups including conventional comparison groups and synthetic control methods.

Project Safe Neighborhoods initiatives utilize many defining features of early twenty-first century criminal justice practices that are worth studying, such as the shift towards proactive evidence-based policing, harsh federal prosecution and sentencing for typically state offenses, and the challenges of increased inter-organizational collaboration within the United States' federal system. Advances in the high-stakes field of policing deserve greater attention, and this systematic review seeks to provide another small but significant step in this foray into understanding the impacts of PSN and focused deterrence on communities, agencies, budgets, and serious crime issues.

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*Studies included in the systematic review ($N = 21$).