



# PROJECT SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS: **WHERE DO I BEGIN?**

A common question for Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) Coordinators and Law Enforcement Coordinators (LEC), particularly for those newly involved in PSN, is, “Where do I begin?” It is important to know how to work with your PSN team to ensure that our goal of reducing violent crime and enhancing the quality of life in our communities is successful. Although prosecutors and law enforcement professionals are experts at responding to crime, investigating crime, and ensuring the delivery of justice through arrest and prosecution as appropriate, they rarely have been trained in leading a multiagency and multipartner team and developing a proactive strategy of prevention, intervention, enforcement, and community development and accountability as envisioned in an effective PSN strategy. Fortunately, there are numerous lessons learned through two decades of PSN implementation. There also are a variety of resources available to support PSN Coordinators and LECs.

## **ORIENTING PRINCIPLES**

One of the consistent findings of research on violent crime is how concentrated it tends to be. Crime, but particularly violent crime, is likely to be highly concentrated among a small group of people (as both perpetrators and victims). It also tends to be found in concentrated geographic locations (e.g., street blocks and hot spots), and it often involves groups, gangs, and networks.<sup>1</sup> Crime analysts and research partners can assist PSN teams in the analysis of these patterns and can help your team identify the concentration of violent crime and the factors driving violent crime in your jurisdiction.

Research also consistently demonstrates that the more focused strategies are on specific violent crime problems (e.g., a specific hot spot, a network of individuals involved in retaliatory violence, intimate partner violence, drug market violence, repeat violent crime offenders, etc.), the more impact we are likely to have. Thus, as we identify

<sup>1</sup> C. Lum & C. S. Koper, 2017, *Evidence-Based Policing: Translating Research into Practice*, Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press; D. Weisburd et al., 2016, *Place Matters: Criminology for the Twenty-First Century*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

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the factors driving violent crime in our specific jurisdiction, we can craft strategies aimed specifically at these drivers. Incorporating this analysis into our PSN strategy is part of what we refer to as the strategic problem-solving approach.

## PSN AND STRATEGIC PROBLEM SOLVING

Strategic planning and data-driven decision making have been staples of PSN since its inception. However, these processes can be unfamiliar to PSN partners experienced in investigating and prosecuting violent crime. Some of the key steps to take to ensure your plan is both strategic and data-driven include:

- Identifying the primary local, state, federal, tribal, and community partners needed to assess the violent crime problem and to craft highly focused prevention and intervention, enforcement, community engagement, and accountability strategies.
- Identifying sources of crime data and crime analysis resources. These can include local law enforcement, regional intelligence centers (including the Regional Information Sharing Systems [RISS] Program that serves your area of the country), High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) intelligence centers, statistical analysis centers (SACs), state police agencies, research partners, and similar sources.
- Combining crime analysis products with street-level intelligence.
- Setting priorities for target areas and violent crime focus and selecting evidence-based and evidence-informed strategies.
- Planning and monitoring implementation of these strategies.
- Ongoing assessment and refinement of strategies.
- Sharing or reporting on efforts, progress, challenges, and successes.

## PSN PLANNING RESOURCES

Fortunately, extensive resources exist to support these efforts. PSN's Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) Program includes numerous resources on its website. In addition, the TTA team is available for consultation.

Examples of these resources include:

- **PSN Partnership Guidebook**—The Guidebook is an excellent resource for those new to PSN to assist with an understanding of partner roles and responsibilities: <https://sites.google.com/view/psnpartnershipguidebook/program-overview>.
- **PSN Training and Technical Assistance Website**—Suggested resources for those new to PSN include:
  - An overview of the TTA program—[psntta.org](https://psntta.org)
  - PSN Blueprint for Success—Guidance for agencies to identify critical stakeholders, determine performance metrics, and learn more about the TTA opportunities: <https://psntta.org/psn-blueprint-for-success/>
  - PSN TTA Catalog—A listing of TTA that is available and how to request it: <https://psntta.org/tta-resources/ttacatalog/>
  - PSN TTA Gun Violence Resource Hub—Approaches to combating gun violence across the nation: <https://psntta.org/tta-resources/gun-violence-resource-hub/>



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- **BJA PSN Website**—A programmatic introduction to PSN: <https://bja.ojp.gov/program/project-safe-neighborhoods-psn/training>.

## PSN TEAM MEMBERS

Your PSN team should be developed carefully and thoughtfully. Internally, a United States Attorney's PSN team should include a lead AUSA and the LEC. Regularly scheduled meetings should be held with U.S. Attorney's Office (USAO) staff who are connected to the USAO's strategy, including all AUSAs prosecuting PSN cases, the Violent Crime Section and/or Criminal Division Chief, and the First Assistant U.S. Attorney. USAOs who have a Community Outreach Specialist (COS) should include the COS in meetings where issues like community engagement are discussed and planned; the Victim-Witness Specialist, when appropriate; and others such as the Public Affairs Officer, who has responsibility for the USAO's website and for preparing and distributing news releases on important cases.

Externally, the PSN team will include members who generally fall under the following categories:

- **Criminal Justice**—federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement; local prosecutors; corrections; juvenile justice; probation and parole; and federal probation officials
- **Local Government**—schools; governing authorities such as mayors, city council, or county commission members; public housing; code enforcement
- **Community Stakeholders**—faith communities; neighborhood associations; social services; foundations; outreach workers; local trauma centers
- **Fiscal agent**—may be the State Administering Agency (SAA) or other private or public agency with the capacity to manage the federal grant funds
- **Research partner**—may be public (such as a university) or a private company

The PSN team can be formal or informal and may contain permanent and/or ad hoc members. There may be a need for a formal task force comprised of law enforcement, and an informal team that includes non-law enforcement representatives. The USAO should give consideration to who needs to be formally assigned to the team. Teams should be built based upon people and agencies needed to effectively implement the PSN strategy, keeping in mind the project design elements required by the Department of Justice.

## POTENTIAL SIDEBAR EXAMPLES:

PSN teams face the challenging decision of whether to focus on small geographic areas, multiple target areas, or districtwide violent crime problems. Given the wide variety of USAO districts, there is no single correct answer to the question. The key is combining analysis of violent crime patterns with the experiential knowledge of PSN partners to develop a strategy that makes sense for the district. Examples arise from across PSN initiatives. The Eastern District of Michigan relied on analysis of violent crime patterns to identify two precincts in Detroit, and specific hotspots within the precincts, to select their PSN target areas. Deeper analysis has revealed a small group of repeat offenders, gangs, and networks of shooters, as well as repeat locations, as the drivers of violence. Consequently, the PSN team has implemented prevention, intervention, and enforcement strategies focused on these two precincts. However, the PSN team recognized that other communities within the district face



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significant violent crime problems as well, so the district focused on other communities including Flint, Jackson, and Saginaw during different PSN funding cycles. A similar problem-solving approach is then applied in these other communities.

The Western District of Oklahoma, based on an analysis of violent crime incidents, recognized that intimate partner violence was driving much of its violent crime. Consequently, the PSN team developed a strategy of prevention, intervention, and enforcement—relying on local, state, and federal partners, and extensive community resources—to develop a highly focused strategy aimed at reducing violence and supporting victims of intimate partner violence. Other districts have developed a combined strategy whereby there is a focus on hotspots in specific urban areas coupled with a regional or districtwide strategy aimed at intimate partner violence.

The District of Montana worked with local law enforcement partners to engage in a systematic assessment of the relationship between substance use, particularly methamphetamine, and violent crime. The analysis confirmed the street level intelligence of law enforcement and prosecutors and informed a strategy focused on drug-related violent crime.

These examples demonstrate that varied strategies make sense for different PSN teams. The strategic planning process, however, was consistent: forming a team, identifying sources of data and intelligence, and using the analysis of the drivers of violent crime to inform the strategy. This is the PSN strategic problem-solving model.

