

BOSTON, MA

Boston's success with Operation Ceasefire, and the program's later deterioration, were closely watched by police departments across the United States. Police Commissioner Ed Davis has learned from that history, and over the last three years has built an improved version of the initiative in the city, which is already producing promising results.

Introduction

Boston, Massachusetts, is the largest city in New England and one of the oldest cities in the United States. In criminology circles, Boston is inseparable from Operation Ceasefire, whose results in the city in the latter half of the 1990s were hailed as the "Boston Miracle." These results led to similar group violence reduction strategies being implemented in many cities across the country. However, when the Ceasefire initiative was dismantled in Boston in 2000, violent crime quickly returned to the streets.

Today, Boston's crime rate is again on the decline, thanks to the reinstatement of the group violence reduction strategy in Boston under the leadership of Boston Police Commissioner Ed Davis. But violent crime is still high in certain pockets of the city. Gang membership in Boston is smaller than in other Leadership Group sites, but it similarly generates a disproportionate share of homicide and gun violence. In 2009, Boston had roughly 65 active street gangs with an estimated active membership of 1,400.ⁱ According to a report by Ted Heinrich, "Members generally range in age from 15-30, have extensive criminal records, and engage in 'cafeteria-style' offending... And they are responsible in any given year for 60-75% of Boston's murders."ⁱⁱ

Very soon after Commissioner Davis was appointed in 2006 he took steps to reestablish Ceasefire; progress was further bolstered this year by new Boston Mayor Thomas Menino's support. So far the program has shown encouraging results: shootings are down for the fourth year in a row, and homicides and violent crime have declined each year since 2006.ⁱⁱⁱ By the end of 2009 violent crime had fallen 18% from 2006 levels.^{iv}

History

Boston's famous Ceasefire was part of the Boston Gun Project, a problem-oriented policing project aimed at preventing and controlling serious youth violence. The problem analysis phase of the Project began in early 1995 led by an interagency working group, which met bi-weekly to address outbreaks of serious gang violence. This working group was comprised of law enforcement personnel, youth workers, and, as the operation expanded, members of the Ten Point Coalition, a group of activist black clergy.

Street operations of Ceasefire began in earnest in early 1996. The first comprehensive gang crackdown was in March and the first "forum" with gang members was held in May 1996. Forums continued and were supplemented by other Ceasefire strategies, and the program reached the height of its operations in 1996-1997.

A large reduction in youth homicides followed immediately after the first gang forum in May 1996, and was sustained for the next five years. A U.S. Department of Justice-sponsored evaluation of Ceasefire reported that the intervention was associated with a nearly two-thirds decrease in the monthly number of Boston youth homicides, among other results.^v

The Ceasefire program, as designed, was in place until 2000. It ended when Lieutenant Detective Gary French, who had been the operational steward of the approach since it was first implemented, was transferred from that position in January 2000. The new commander did not continue the weekly Ceasefire meetings.

During the early 2000s, the BPD experimented with alternative approaches, expanding Ceasefire tactics to a range of problems. These approaches, known as Boston Strategy II, seemed to diffuse focus from the original target of gang violence. “I think in some ways Boston was a victim of their success,” Commissioner Ed Davis says. “People thought that the violence problem was licked and that they could move on to other things.”

But the problem wasn’t licked. Between 2000 and 2006, the yearly number of shootings increased by 133% and youth homicides by 160%.^{vi} Much of the increase in youth homicide was driven by a resurgence of gang violence in Boston. While there were only five gang-related youth homicides in 1999, the rate peaked at 30 victims in 2006.^{vii}

Meanwhile, Ed Davis had become familiar with the Boston work while still chief of Lowell, Massachusetts, and had implemented a variant of Ceasefire in Lowell. When Davis was named BPD Commissioner in December 2006, he began an attempt in the department “to put the pieces back together” of Ceasefire. The city has learned from some of its mistakes, most notably the initiative’s lack of institutionalization. Reinvigorating Ceasefire in a sustainable way was therefore a central priority for Davis upon his arrival to the department.

Current Status

The group violence reduction strategy—still familiarly called “Ceasefire” in Boston—is fully operational in the city, and many of the original components have been reinstated. “All the critical components of the original Ceasefire program are alive and functioning here in the city,” Commissioner Davis says. “In my mind it’s working as well as it did in the 1990s.” Indeed, in the three years since the program has been revived, there has been a 40% reduction in gang homicides and shootings are down for the fourth year in a row.

Group violence reduction strategy

Since Ceasefire was reinstated in 2007, Gary French says, about a dozen call-ins have taken place with police, clergy, the district attorney and U.S. attorney present. The clergy members actually run the meeting, led by Boston’s influential Ten Point Coalition. The call-ins look very similar to their original format. They last about 30-35 minutes, are held at the Courthouse, and probationers make up most of the audience.

The community organizations are largely the same ones that participated in the original Ceasefire. Sometimes mothers of victims speak and photos of slain gang members are displayed. And after a call-in, the working group makes sure communication proceeds full circle. “We do our best to advertise when somebody goes to federal prison, to get that information back to the group so that they understand these aren’t just empty threats,” Commissioner Davis says.

The city has experimented with some tweaks to the call-in. They tried bringing in incarcerated gang members under sheriff’s custody, but that led to a “reunion” atmosphere that distracted rather than aided delivery of the message, French says. They tried mixing juveniles with adults in the call-in, but the juveniles were too immature. They’ve encouraged voluntary attendance via street intervention workers, but most of the non-probationers that do attend are brought by a friend on probation.

A more recent addition to the Ceasefire strategy in Boston is intimate meetings the police hold with key members of a particular gang. There have been about three dozen of these since they began in late 2007, and they take the form of a one to two-hour discussion with a couple gang members and only about six other people in the room: two street intervention workers, two police officers, and two former gang members. The discussion, French says, is not the monologue of a call-in but is more of a dialogue about “their future, their friends, what historically happens to impact players.” Another tactic is just to sit down for coffee with one of these impact players, French says. Like call-ins, these approaches remove the false sense of anonymity that offenders have. Throughout, the group enforcement message is retained, Davis says.

Other “levers” are Operation Homefront and programs in schools. Under Operation Homefront, police and clergy members jointly go to the homes of at-risk individuals and have a conversation with them and their families. The meeting encourages family members to help in changing the individual’s behavior. For younger offenders, BPD school officers work with school administrators to keep tabs on truancy, which is often a warning sign for gang involvement. Students who are frequently truant are paid a home visit.

One of the significant changes from the original Ceasefire is the data analysis underpinning the current initiative. Under Commissioner Davis the BPD’s data capacity has expanded dramatically. The department implemented CompStat within its Boston Regional Intelligence Center (BRIC), which was begun in 2005 as a national fusion center to develop intelligence on terrorism. The center has since been used toward other threats including gang violence. It maps crime, studies emerging trends, and gives a weekly threat analysis that guides the BPD’s deployment.

The refinement of data collection has also allowed the BPD to analyze not just homicides but shootings. Shootings “give you a fuller picture of violence in a city,” Anthony Braga, Senior Research Associate at Harvard University, says. Braga currently tracks circumstances of every shooting in the city and the groups involved. Every weekday morning all the districts and specialized units have a conference call that updates them on shootings from the night before. Formal reviews of all shootings are completed quarterly, which feed back into “priority investigations” meetings that maintain focus on those groups.

This real-time intelligence allows Ceasefire to be deployed more quickly and in a more targeted manner. Detailed data will also provide a greater capacity for evaluation of Ceasefire's impacts. A formal evaluation will be completed by the end of the summer, examining proportion of gang-related shootings year by year and compare groups who received the intervention versus those who didn't.

A second important development is the decentralization of the strategy in an attempt to better institutionalize it, which is still a work in progress, Braga says. There's been an effort to engage a wider range of people both within the department and externally. Now, Ceasefire is talked about openly within CompStat to engage command staff. Also, Ceasefire's original one working group has now been supplemented by four district-level working groups chaired by the captains of the districts. This is intended to engage a wider range of people and make the initiative more sustainable—"a lesson that was learned," Braga says.

Conclusion

Boston, the birthplace of the group violence reduction model, has continued to learn from and improve upon its first implementation. Ceasefire's decline was disastrous for crime rates in the city of Boston, but the initiative's reinvigoration since 2007 has shown encouraging results and new progress in data collection and decentralized management promise to both refine the strategy and make it more permanently sustainable in the city.

ⁱ Heinrich, "Combining Compstat and Ceasefire to Reduce Violent Crime."

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2006/data/table_08_ma.html; http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/prelimsem2009/table_4il-mo.html

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Anthony Braga et al., Problem-Oriented Policing, Deterrence, and Youth Violence: An Evaluation of Boston's Operation Ceasefire, 38 J. RES. IN CRIME & DELINQ. 195, 199-200 (2001).

^{vi} Anthony A. Braga, David Hureau, and Christopher Winship (2008). Losing Faith? Police, Black Churches, and the Resurgence of Youth Violence in Boston. *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law*, 6 (1) 141-172.

^{vii} Ibid.