

# Testing a Public Health Approach to Gun Violence

This is a summary of an evaluation of Save Our Streets (SOS), a community-based project established to address the problem of gun violence in Crown Heights, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York.

SOS is a replication of Chicago Cure Violence (formerly Chicago CeaseFire), a public health model for gun violence prevention founded in Chicago in 1999. The primary components of the model are outreach and conflict mediation directed towards individuals at high risk for future gun violence, as well as broader community mobilization and education efforts.

Save Our Streets was implemented by the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center, a project of the Center for Court Innovation, with the help of funding from the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance. The key program elements were as follows:

- *Target Population:* SOS is a data-driven program based on evidence that a relatively small group of individuals is responsible for perpetrating the majority of violent crimes.
- *Public Health Perspective:* Similar to previous public health strategies for addressing problems such as smoking or seatbelt use, the program attempts to modify community norms regarding gun violence.
- *Street Outreach and Conflict Mediation:* SOS employs “credible messengers,” with experience in the target neighborhood and knowledge of local gang or street conflicts, to perform outreach.
- *Public Education and Community Mobilization:* The model includes planned community events as well as “shooting responses” (vigils held within 72 hours of a shooting at or close to the shooting location with the purpose of sending a message that violence will not be tolerated).

**Outreach and Conflict Mediation:** The research team documented the following activities:

- *Client Characteristics:* Over the 29-month period studied, four SOS outreach workers recruited 96 participants. The majority of SOS participants were assessed as high risk (68%) or medium risk (18%), based on age, educational or employment problems, prior involvement with the justice system and gang activity. Demographically, most participants were male, black or West Indian, and between the ages of 15 and 26.
- *Outreach:* Participants were retained in the program on average for one year. Outreach workers carried caseloads of 5-15 participants. Interviews with outreach workers suggest that time with participants was spent finding nonviolent alternatives to conflict, helping them understand the risks of gun violence, and acting as “a father-figure, friend, or spiritual advisor.”
- *Violence Interruption:* Outreach workers also worked as “violence interrupters” by identifying and mediating street conflicts that were likely to erupt into gun violence. The staff reported mediating more than 100 potentially violent street conflicts involving more than 1,000 individuals over the 29-month study period.

**Impact on Gun Violence:** An interrupted time series method was used to analyze the impact of the SOS project on gun violence. The analysis compared Crown Heights to a matched comparison group of three adjacent police

precincts with similar demographic and violent crime rates. (Comparison precincts approximately correspond to the neighborhoods of Brownsville, East Flatbush, and parts of Bedford-Stuyvesant). The analysis spanned 18 months prior to SOS implementation (pre period) and 21 months following implementation (post period).

- *Changes in Gun Violence:* Results showed that average monthly shooting rates in Crown Heights decreased by 6% from the pre to the post periods, while increasing in the three comparison areas between 18% and 28%.
- *Relative Reduction in Gun Violence:* Compared with the upward trend in the comparison precincts, the relative difference between Crown Heights and the other neighborhoods was significant. This analysis suggests that gun violence in Crown Heights was 20% lower than what it would have been had gun violence trends mirrored those of similar, adjacent precincts.

During the post-implementation period, monthly shooting rates increased in Brooklyn as a whole by nearly 20%, mirroring the average increase in the three comparison neighborhoods and suggesting that the comparison neighborhoods were broadly representative of borough-wide trends. Additionally, research suggests that there were no new violence prevention or special policing initiatives in Crown Heights during the implementation period other than SOS. These factors suggest that the decrease in Crown Heights may be attributable to the SOS program, rather than displacement of violent crime to neighboring precincts.

**Impact on Community Norms:** Over the 29-month study period, SOS organized 43 community events and 50 targeted shooting responses that were estimated to have attracted more than 6,000 participants. Additionally, the staff distributed over 5,000 educational materials regarding gun violence to Crown Heights locations.

The research team conducted an anonymous pre/post survey of Crown Heights residents. The pre-SOS survey was conducted in July 2010, three months after full SOS implementation, and the post-SOS survey was conducted 16 months later in November 2011. Approximately 100 residents participated in each wave of the survey.

- *Awareness:* A high percentage of the community was exposed to the mobilization campaign. At Wave I, only 27% of respondents were aware of a violence prevention campaign, compared with 73% at Wave II.
- *Campaign Effectiveness:* Exposure to SOS increased residents' confidence in the potential of a mobilization campaign to decrease gun violence in the community. Only 29% of Wave I respondents felt that a campaign such as SOS would be "very likely" to reduce gun violence as compared with 55% of respondents in Wave II. Respondents who personally participated in SOS community events were significantly more likely than others to believe in the efficacy of the community mobilization campaign.
- *Safety and Norms Related to Gun Possession:* According to the survey results, the SOS program did not have a significant impact on residents' sense of safety in the neighborhood or opinions of the legitimacy of carrying guns or joining a gang.
- *Relationship of Violence Exposure and Normative Perceptions:* Among respondents who had ever seen someone threatened or shot with a gun, 56% supported the legitimacy of carrying a gun for self-protection, compared with only 35% of those who had not witnessed violence. Respondents who had witnessed violence were also more likely to support joining a gang for self-protection (31%) when compared with those who had not witnessed violence (23%).

**To download the full report, visit:** [www.courtinnovation.org/research/testing-public-health-approach-gun-violence](http://www.courtinnovation.org/research/testing-public-health-approach-gun-violence)

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