

HOW TO PREVENT GUN CRIME: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COMMUNITY

JULY 2006

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Since August 2003, the San Diego Association of Governments' (SANDAG) Criminal Justice Research Division has been an active partner of the local Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) Task Force. SANDAG was selected as the U.S. Attorney's media outreach partner to conduct an anti-gun violence media campaign targeted to youth in San Diego County and is in the final stages of implementing that campaign, which is due to end in September 2006.

In the fall of 2005, the local PSN Task Force elected to target specific adult offenders in illegal possession of a gun; namely, convicted felons, misdemeanor domestic violence offenders, and undocumented immigrants. To complement this strategy, the Task Force expressed interest in developing a second media campaign and felt it would be beneficial to seek out the community's ideas for designing it.

As a result, The Children's Initiative contracted with SANDAG to conduct focus groups throughout San Diego County with community leaders and residents. SANDAG has previous experience conducting focus groups for various projects, including PSN. Between April and June 2006, SANDAG conducted five focus groups with 128 adult participants throughout five main regions of the County, including South Bay, East County, North County, and two areas of the Central region (Linda Vista and Southeast San Diego). While discussing adult gun crime, all focus groups stressed the vital importance of working with juveniles as a way to prevent adult gun crime. A description of the focus groups and a summary of the participants' responses are described in this report.

FOCUS GROUPS

How were the Groups Selected, and Where were they Held?

With the assistance of The Children's Initiative, SANDAG brought together five focus groups by identifying existing coalitions, community groups and local stakeholders who work to strengthen their communities. SANDAG approached the leaders of each group and described the local PSN Task Force's current work and effort, SANDAG's role, and the purpose of the focus groups. Each community leader committed to invite additional participants to the focus group, including community residents who were not regular members of the collaborative or community group. One hour was provided for SANDAG to conduct the focus group. Table 1 shows the names of each coalition/community group, the date the focus group was held, and the number of participants.

**Table 1
SELECTED FOCUS GROUPS**

REGION	COALITION NAME	DATE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
East County	East Region Collaborative Network	April 20, 2006	22
South Bay	Chula Vista Community Collaborative	April 26, 2006	48
North County	Eastside Partnership for a Safe Neighborhood	May 8, 2006	17
Central – North	Linda Vista Collaborative	May 17, 2006	21
Central – South	Southeast San Diego Coalition	June 22, 2006	20
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS:			128

Who Participated?

At each group, SANDAG distributed a sign-in sheet asking for the participant’s name, organization, and position/title/role. The majority (42%) of participants worked in the area of social service. Twelve percent (15 individuals) identified themselves as “community members or residents”. It is worth noting that although those working in the field of social service are not counted among the “community member” group, many are themselves residents of the community in which the focus group took place and have direct knowledge of these communities. The remaining participants were representatives from each of the following: County of San Diego Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) (14%); other collaboratives (11%); schools and colleges (5%); other private organizations (private practitioners, civic associations, and community planning groups) (5%); city staff (4%); law enforcement (3%); elected officials (2%); and hospitals (2%).

What Questions Were Asked?

SANDAG provided each focus group with three prepared, open-ended questions and explained that the discussion would center on adult offenders in illegal possession of a gun (felons, domestic violence offenders, and undocumented immigrants). The three questions were selected by SANDAG and The Children’s Initiative to elicit the greatest degree of discussion among focus group participants. These questions were:

- 1) What are the best ways to prevent gun crime?
- 2) What are the best gun crime prevention messages that should be released to the community?
- 3) How should these messages be released to the community?

Two SANDAG staff, with previous group facilitation experience, staffed each group: one to engage directly with the group to ask the prepared questions, as well as probes when necessary, paraphrase responses, and keep the group focused to the topic; and the second staff member to note all responses on a board at the front of the room.

What did Community Members Think?

Question 1: "What are the best ways to prevent gun crime?"

While SANDAG worked to focus participants on the three adult offender categories in the Task Force's prosecution strategy, all of the groups were more concerned with the broader subject of reducing the culture of violence in U.S. society, as well as how to prevent gun crime among juveniles.

Participants strongly believed there is a need to increase public knowledge of gun crime and sentencing guidelines, as well as reduce the glorification of guns in the media.

Various themes emerged from the responses to Question 1, three of which were more commonly mentioned: 1) the need for greater education and awareness for both adults and youth around the risks and consequences of gun use; 2) recommended changes in the legal enforcement of guns and gun crimes; and 3) the pervasiveness of guns and violence in this nation's media and culture. Almost all participants felt that guns were glorified in this country and that the media plays a large role in perpetuating this. They also believed that with greater community education and involvement, preventing gun crimes was an obtainable goal.

Awareness and Education

Respondents at each focus group mentioned the need for broader education and awareness about the dangers and consequences of using a gun. The most frequently mentioned recommendation was the need to educate parents on how to be responsible gun owners (speak to their children about gun safety, use gun locks, and store guns safely) and find ways to involve their children in healthier activities than video games and television. The prevalence of violence in video games was a frequently voiced concern. Participants felt it was important to teach youth about the dangerous realities of gun use ("guns are not toys") and the difference between video game violence and real-life violence.

The groups also felt that gun crime prevention could be fostered if the media did more to inform the public about sentencing guidelines connected to gun crimes. Many individuals said they were not aware of these sentencing laws and that if more people did know, they would be less likely to commit a gun crime. Another suggestion was to publish perpetrators' sentences in the crime blotter. Other recommendations regarding education and awareness included the following:

- Ask youth to think of one adult or peer they trust to go to if they see a gun at school;
- Help individuals understand that guns are not the answer to self-protection and directly address their fears;
- Build inter-generational trust between students and school staff, and parents and their children through on-going forums and community activities;
- Build inter-community trust between schools and parents;
- Bridge the cultural divide between school staff and students; and
- Reframe how police and community residents view each other by inviting officers into a school or community center to hang out and get to know each other on a personal level.

Cultural Shifts

One of the prevailing themes was to change the nation's culture of "normalizing" guns. The most common suggestion to achieve this is for the community to apply pressure to various media outlets and insist that they reduce graphic violence content and the glorification of guns in television and film. Other recommendations were to:

- Invite families to trade in their guns for toys;
- Conduct household surveys to determine when people feel gun ownership is acceptable, whether they own guns for hunting, collections, self-defense, etc.¹;
- Mobilize the community to denounce radio ads selling guns;
- Reduce/eliminate billboards promoting gun shows;
- Convey to the public that it is not acceptable to carry guns to school or elsewhere;
- Change the dominant culture of using guns as a solution to all problems (fear, intimidation, self-defense, etc.);
- Dispel the notion of "guns as recreation"; and
- Instill the responsibility that reducing violence begins at home.

Changes in Enforcement and Regulation

Not surprisingly, each focus group provided suggestions to prevent gun crime through legal avenues, by enforcing existing laws and promoting new ones. Primary among their suggestions was to reduce the number of and access to guns (real, fake, and illegal) in the community and "on the street". Ways to achieve this included enforcing existing laws requiring offenders to surrender their guns and employing more proactive enforcement, including more frequent police contacts, pat-downs, and weapons confiscation. Other suggested legal solutions include the following:

- Require permits to buy ammunition, sell ammunition and weapons separately, and make the cost of ammunition prohibitive;
- Prohibit businesses from selling guns and alcohol at the same establishment;
- Use the Drug Abatement Response Team (DART) model to target specific properties where gun crime is prevalent (i.e., DART, which was established in San Diego in 1990, is a multi-department task force which targets properties throughout the city that have been continuously used for illegal drug activities.);
- Punish parents of youth who commit gun crimes;
- Create stricter law enforcement response to gun crime and increase mandatory sentencing of gun-related crimes;
- Change gun laws: for example, one participant said "it is a felony to carry a two-edged knife, but a only a misdemeanor to carry a concealed firearm";
- Restrict the sale of assault weapons; and
- Require thorough background checks before any gun purchase.

¹ Surveys of this type have been conducted by various research agencies, including the National Institute of Justice report Guns in America: National Survey on Private Ownership and Use of Firearms, May 1997, <http://www.ncjrs.gov/txtfiles/165476.txt>.

Data Needs

One focus group in particular expressed an interest in seeing any existing data regarding gun crime, as well as collecting additional data to develop a more neighborhood-specific media campaign as well as prevention and enforcement strategies. Some of these data may have already been collected by criminal justice agencies, as well as the data specifically compiled for PSN by SANDAG and the RAND Corporation, the evaluation partner for the local effort.

- Who commits gun crime?
- What does gun crime cost a community?
- How many and what types of guns are sold in San Diego County, and to whom?
- How many guns are in homes throughout the County?
- How many suicides/attempted suicides are committed by guns?
- Which neighborhoods have the highest prevalence of gun show billboards?

Community and Legislative Activities

Two suggested policy changes were to encourage political candidates to take a pre-election pledge not to accept gun lobby money and to remove the Department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms from the Treasury Department and create it as its own regulatory agency.

Question 2: "What are the best gun crime prevention messages that should be released to the community?"

Participants were united in believing that media campaign images should be realistic, graphic, and concentrate on the consequences of gun crime (i.e., injury, death, and loss of freedom). They also believed an effective campaign needed a consistent tag line and be tailored to each community based on its demographics and crime data. The groups felt it was vital to include the public in the development of the campaign, as well as utilize respected community leaders, mentors, and family members to disseminate the message.

According to the focus groups, campaign images should graphically and realistically depict the consequences of gun violence.

Despite research showing that "scared straight" tactics are not effective, many participants felt it would be worthwhile to use personal testimonials of individuals who had either committed or been victimized by gun crime (e.g., as used in campaigns by MADD and the anti-tobacco movement). These could include young adults who were shot and seriously injured describe their experience as a prevention message to reduce the glorification of being shot and dispel the notion that gunshot victims are "martyrs".

Along a similar vein, it was suggested to show the graphic reality of what life is like to be maimed or paralyzed by a gun shot with a tag line such as "there's nothing glamorous about being disabled". Another suggested image was a coffin with the victim's friends and family members gathered around it. They also suggested showing a real corpse to drive home how differently they are depicted in the media compared to reality. Educating African-American males about their shortened average lifespan due to gun violence was another suggestion.

Some individuals suggested using real data to drive home the message, i.e. posting how many individuals who accessed guns illegally were also killed by a gun, number of suicides/attempted

committed by a gun, the number of gun crimes occurring in a particular community, and the prevalence of how often a person's own gun is used against them.

The groups suggested the following tag lines:

- "It can happen to anyone";
- "Guns hurt everyone";
- "Has a gun been used on a deer, or on someone dear to you?";
- "Real men don't need guns";
- "Guns mark the end";
- "Every action has a consequence";
- "One stupid decision can change your life forever";
- "Safety is everyone's responsibility";
- "Which choice would you make—being alive, or being afraid?"; and
- "Is fear worth more than your life"?

Question 3: "How should these messages be released to the community?"

Almost all participants agreed that the campaign should be disseminated through a variety of venues (radio, television, and billboards) and be representative of different cultures and languages (especially Spanish and Asian languages).

There was some disagreement, however, on the usefulness of billboards (too expensive) and posters. For campaigns targeting youth, one high school educator felt that teens "don't read anything on the wall" and "only deface posters". Instead, they suggested "going straight to the community with real-life stories".

Those who felt posters would be useful said that they should contain eye-catching images, be very graphic, and use specific and consistent messages. Posters could be displayed at schools (especially in school newspapers), tattoo parlors, pool halls, bars, teen centers, gang awareness classes, and domestic violence classes.

Another idea was to contact disc jockey's (DJs) at radio stations popular with young adults, especially rap music stations. DJs could be asked to hang posters at popular events and make contact with popular rap artists to make a musical connection between the campaign and the community. In fact, Linda Vista Teen Center has a recording studio and offered to assist the campaign in this regard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After examining the overall content of the responses, several specific recommendations were sifted into two categories: direct action items that might be implemented at the local level by community members; and indirect policy and legislative changes that could be spearheaded by private individuals in conjunction with public agencies and elected officials.

Direct Action Items

Many action items emerged from the focus groups, some of which may be in effect; have been previously tried but either lapsed and need revisiting or were met with limited success; or need to be considered as new possibilities. Chief among these are the following:

- Form a Gun Crime Prevention Roundtable: Advocates for other social issues, such as domestic violence, child abuse, and prisoner reentry, have experienced progress with their agendas by forming an interdisciplinary “roundtable” of stakeholders that meet and discuss solutions.
- Gun buy back programs and gun safety education for legal gun owners: One example is The Children’s Initiative which received donated gun locks and distributes them at various community events, such as Back-to-School Night, as a way to reduce accidental shootings and foster greater responsibility among gun owners;
- Research and analyze existing data on gun crime trends and share the analysis with policy makers and community members to devise realistic and measurable strategies;
- Apply public pressure on the media to minimize the glorification of guns on television and in film;
- Create opportunities for enhanced education and awareness (using culturally sensitive and language-appropriate curriculum) involving gun safety in the home, mandated gun laws and sentencing guidelines, and realities of gun violence and its consequences; and
- Provide venues for open dialogue about gun crime and other types of violence between youth and adults, schools and community members, and law enforcement and youth.

Long-Term Solutions

Several ideas put forth by the groups fall in the category of broad policy and cultural changes requiring cooperation between private individuals and decision-making bodies. These are long-term approaches to shifting cultural norms and values that would require clearly defined goals, cooperation, and consistent leadership.

- Provide healthy outlets for youth to reduce time spent with violent video games and other media;
- Reduce violence in the home;
- Change the normalization of guns in our culture as a means of recreation and a solution to alleviate fear and feel powerful; and
- Channel community efforts into activities at the local, state, and national level to shape priorities and change existing laws affecting gun access and ownership; and
- Building trust between law enforcement and community members.