

Review of evaluations of Project Safe Neighborhoods programs identifies gaps in literature, generally favorable outcomes

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In the 1990s, changes in violent crime rates, social and political unrest directed at law enforcement, and technological innovations set the stage for major changes in administering criminal justice. Several innovative approaches to policing were tested, seeking to take tougher, smarter, more focused approaches to gun violence, gang crime, open air drug markets, and the recidivism of chronic offenders. These led to the creation in 2001 of Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), a multi-agency program centered around focused deterrence strategies, targeted proactive policing, and increased use of federal prosecutorial power.

In a new study, researchers evaluated PSN, which is administered by the U.S. Department of Justice, has been funded by grants totaling several billion dollars, and has resulted in interventions across all 94 federal judicial districts. The study, which aimed to review and assess the overall effectiveness of the program, found gaps in the literature, but characterized the overall body of studies as favorable.

Conducted by researchers at Sam Houston University, the University of Texas at Arlington, and the University of Texas at El Paso, the study appears in *Justice Evaluation Journal*.

"Since PSN constitutes its own unique framework and approach for addressing violence, examining this body of literature as a whole is important," explains Davis Shelfer, a Ph.D. student in [criminal justice](#) and criminology at Sam Houston University, who led the study.

"We sought to do a comprehensive review of the literature on PSN to facilitate identifying best practices in implementing PSN programs, determining the value of PSN as a budget item and strategic focus, and informing future research."

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. Although studies have examined individual PSN projects, none has considered the collective body of literature on the program.

In this work, researchers searched the literature, focusing on [empirical studies](#) and program evaluations in English that were published through March 2021. Twenty-one studies met their criteria for inclusion, but their search produced an insufficient number of rigorous, comparable empirical designs to make it a meta-analysis. While they could not draw definitive conclusions about the overall effectiveness of PSN programs, the researchers say they found enough studies to identify patterns, make inferences, and identify gaps for future evaluators to consider. PSN had a statistically significant, intended impact on 50% of the outcomes evaluated. A further 42% of effects were in the desired direction but did not reach statistical significance, and 8 percent of outcomes seemed to have been influenced in an undesired direction by PSN interventions.

The authors characterized the current body of literature as it relates to both the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of PSN as favorable. PSN reduces crime, at least in the short term, although many of the effects are small and may not last over time.

In particular, focused deterrence strategies, such as the "pulling levers" method used by PSN programs, appear to be a favored approach, especially since a small percentage of individuals are responsible for a disproportionately high number of offenses. (Rather than broadly increasing the scale and scope of the criminal justice system, agencies can "pull" specific "levers" relating to the crime problem they wish to reduce.)

PSN working groups that 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 have a greater likelihood of achieving desirable goals than do sites with constant turnover of leadership; irregular meeting schedules; and a lack of shared vision and cohesion among federal, state, and local agencies, research partners, and the community.

The researchers also noted geographical gaps in the studies reviewed, which means that after two decades of programming, many U.S. high-population centers (e.g., those in Texas, New York, California, and Washington) have not had a publicly accessible empirical evaluation of PSN. Thus, the results of PSN evaluations in just a few locations cannot be generalized to determine the effectiveness of the whole body of nationwide programs.

"While PSN interventions across the country draw from a consistent set of theoretical, legal, and normative frameworks, the strategy for addressing violent crime in each district are adapted to fit the local needs and unique context of each PSN target site," notes Christi L. Gullion, assistant professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Texas at Arlington, who coauthored the study. "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 and help us understand more fully which lessons should be learned and applied in policymaking."

Since the Department of Justice has encouraged PSN programs to incorporate a research partner into their working groups, the authors suggest that scholars with access to relevant data scientifically evaluate PSN programs whenever possible. This is especially important given the tens of millions of dollars in expenditures per fiscal year on these programs and the broad range of potential implications for criminal [justice](#) policy.

More information: Davis Shelfer et al, A Systematic Review of

Project Safe Neighborhoods Effects, *Justice Evaluation Journal* (2022).
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