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The St. Louis Police Partnership: An Individualized Focused Deterrence Implementation Guide

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Abstract

Focused deterrence is a particularly promising approach for significantly reducing gang, group, and individual criminal behavior. Typical focused deterrence approaches involve bringing together individuals at high risk for violence in face-to-face group interventions, usually called "offender notification meetings" or "call-ins." In the St. Louis Police Partnership, individuals at high risk for violence were instead targeted using customized, individual in-person meetings with detectives and parole officers assigned to the program. This novel approach was found to be effective using a randomized controlled trial evaluation. This implementation guide summarizes the basic features of the St. Louis Police Partnership, discusses challenges and lessons learned, and details key steps that must be taken to implement similar programs effectively in other jurisdictions.

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Introduction

Focused deterrence is a particularly promising approach for significantly reducing gang, group, and individual criminal behavior. Focused deterrence programs typically bring criminal justice personnel, community members, and social service providers together with individuals at high risk for violence in face-to-face group interventions, usually called "offender notification meetings" or "call-ins" (Kennedy, 2009). A twofold "carrot and stick" message is delivered: *We know who you are, and continued violence will not be tolerated. Services and support are available to anyone who wants to take a different path* (Kennedy, 2009; Kennedy et al., 2001). After the meeting, program staff engage in direct and repeated communication with participants, enforcement is enhanced for those who continue to engage in crime, and social services are made available to those who express a desire to change (Braga & Weisburd, 2015; Kennedy, 2009; RAND, 2023).

Focused deterrence has been identified through systematic reviews of prior research as a "very promising" strategy to reduce violence and other forms of offending (Braga & Weisburd, 2012; Braga et al., 2018). However, the absence of randomized controlled study designs "continues to be a key weakness in drawing conclusions about focused deterrence programs" (Braga et al., 2018, p. 239). Prior research is also limited in that it has measured program effects on geographic areas rather than on individuals, and the programs themselves may be limited because they engage with groups rather than with individual offenders. The current randomized controlled study helped to fill this gap by evaluating an individualized focused deterrence program operated by the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department (SLMPD) and the St. Louis office of the Missouri Department of Corrections' Division of Probation and Parole (MODOC): The St. Louis Police Partnership.

This implementation guide summarizes the basic features of the St. Louis Police Partnership, discusses challenges and lessons learned, and details key steps that must be taken to implement similar programs effectively in other jurisdictions.

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The St. Louis Police Partnership

In fall 2016, the SLMPD and MODOC entered into a partnership to deliver focused deterrence programming to St. Louis probationers and parolees who were at high risk of committing firearm-related crime. In 2019, the National Institute of Justice began funding a formal evaluation of the St. Louis Police Partnership. Eligible participants included probationers and parolees who were placed under community supervision within the prior six months and who were sentenced on firearm-related charges (including unlawful possession of a firearm, unlawful use of a firearm, firearm assault, firearm robbery, or another offense in which a firearm was possessed or used) or had records of one or more arrests on firearm-related charges. After eligible participants were identified and consented, researchers randomly assigned them to either a treatment group that met regularly with a police officer and community corrections officer or a control group that was subject to normal supervision requirements.

A key difference between the St. Louis Police Partnership and other focused deterrence programs is that individuals rather than groups were the focal point of the delivery mechanism. A police detective and a community corrections officer were tasked with conducting and documenting meetings with each treatment participant no less than once every three months, with the frequency of meetings depending on the participant's adherence to community supervision conditions and requirements and progress toward meeting the objectives discussed with the police detectives. The meetings typically lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, and most were held in the participants' homes, with the remainder held in the probation and parole office, at the participants' places of employment, or via phone or video (hereafter, the meetings are referred to as "home visits").

The logic of individualized deterrence is similar to that of providing individualized tutoring and other educational services to students experiencing academic difficulties. In both cases, the focus is on the specific problems, needs, and progress of an individual, which is likely to be more difficult to achieve in a group setting. One-on-one meetings provide more time for individual engagement and discussions with family members or other loved ones, who are often present in the meetings. Moreover, they allow for follow-up meetings. In addition, individualized meetings may be more effective than group meetings at enhancing the legitimacy of law enforcement in the eyes of wary offenders, through extended interaction with a police officer off the street and outside of the police department.

To progress in and eventually graduate from the program, participants had to engage in home visits and fulfill additional requirements, including obtaining and retaining gainful employment or enrolling in full-time school, vocational training, or substance abuse treatment;

not having technical violations for a consecutive period of at least 30 days; not having law violations; reporting to the probation and parole office as directed; and complying with supervision plans.

Researchers and program staff met together regularly to track study participants' home visits, rearrests, technical violations, and changes to participant supervision and risk levels. MODOC staff filled out exit forms either when a participant left the program or by the end of the study period on July 31, 2023. The form recorded, among other measures, the reason for the exit, arrests and technical violations that occurred while the participant was in the program, and changes in the participant's educational status, vocational training, employment, substance abuse treatment, and attitude toward the police.

Evaluation results

The researchers conducted both outcome and process evaluations of the program (Rosenfeld & Vaughn, 2024). The outcome evaluation compared the treatment and control groups on multiple background attributes and assessed the effectiveness of the program in lowering arrest and technical violations; strengthening prosocial behaviors, with a strong focus on employment; and changing participants' attitudes toward the police. Findings from logistic regression analyses indicated that the program had a significant indirect effect on recidivism by boosting employment: treatment group participants were more likely than control participants to be employed, and employed participants were less likely to be arrested or charged with a technical violation by the end of the study. The study also found that those in the treatment group had a more positive attitude toward the police when they left the study.

The main objective of the process evaluation was to determine whether the program was implemented according to plan. Data to assess program delivery were compiled from the following three sources: (1) coding forms devised by the researchers and administered by MODOC staff documenting participant eligibility, background characteristics, and progress; (2) written descriptions prepared by the police detectives and probation and parole officers of the home visits with treatment participants; and (3) semistructured interviews with eight treatment participants, five police officers, four community corrections personnel, and a judge who referred individuals to the program. The evaluation found that the study was faithfully implemented, although the COVID-19 pandemic led to a smaller than anticipated sample size.

Implementing the St. Louis Model in Other Jurisdictions

The researchers concluded that randomized controlled studies of individualized focused deterrence are feasible and, based on the St. Louis experience, are an effective method of crime reduction. Previous evaluations of focused deterrence have reported problems with maintaining program integrity through the evaluation period (Braga et al., 2018). The following are 10 basic requirements for successfully adopting individualized focused deterrence programs, maintaining their integrity over time, and bringing them to scale. We emphasize that these are the minimal necessary preconditions for successful implementation of individualized focused deterrence initiatives based on the St. Louis model. Depending on the specific features of the local context (e.g., police union opposition, budget shortages, extreme police-community tensions), additional steps may need to be taken to prepare the ground for adoption.

1. Carefully select participating police officers

The six original police detectives assigned to the Partnership were selected by program stakeholders and supervisors. In interviews, these detectives were spoken of quite highly by program staff and participants alike for their willingness to go the extra mile for program participants. One detective said, "One of our goals is to build that relationship, something that we can meet throughout the program and after the program. I'm still in contact [with] and get invited to baby showers from subjects that we dealt with in 2017." Participants described detectives as "down to earth" and "not judgmental" and said that they were available for them whenever they needed to talk. One participant elaborated on his support team's availability:

> He goes out of his way because he gave me his phone number and was like, "Hey bro, call me anytime you need anything." He said, "Even if you just need to talk. Just give me a call man." And that's huge to know you got that type of support from somebody who don't even know you….But that makes me believe in who he is as a person and what it is he trying to accomplish. And [probation and parole officer] was like this too. Yes. She was great. And then she used to tell me all the time, "Call [detective]" and I'd be telling her about stuff. She'd be like, "Call [detective]. That's what he there for. "…Yeah. And so anytime I called him, like I say, he was able to point me in the right direction and like I said, he never made me feel like he was judging me. And he said it many times. He understood that the problems the guys like me have growing up in the neighborhoods that we grew up in. And he also, when I was telling him what I wanted to accomplish

> out here as far as getting into programs to help other kids, sometimes people look at you like, "Ah, he just talking that talk."…It was never that. It was like, "Okay, let me see what I can do." It's always, let me see what I can do. Let me see what I can do. It's never like, "Ah nah, you playing around. You don't mean that." It was never that. It was always, let me see what I can do. Let me check here, let me check there and he get it done.

A corrections officer also spoke highly of the Partnership's team efforts and the effects on the individuals and families involved:

> I remember one of our clients killed themselves and it was like a week before Christmas. And we all got together and the detectives delivered Christmas presents to his three kids….And his mom was, she was so grateful. She didn't know. I mean, she's burying her son and she's got three grandkids now she has to raise and she didn't know how she was going to pay for Christmas or anything. I remember they helped....We had a client's mom who needed inpatient treatment because she was hooked on heroin. We got together as a team to figure it out and got her back and transported her there. We had one client who had a domestic situation that was going bad and police were being called. And so our detectives responded to help the situation and nobody had to get arrested that day. But if regular patrol would have responded, somebody would've been arrested, probably would've been our client. They definitely help out families. And I think that affect—I mean, that's affecting the families, that's affecting their kids. And if their kids are seeing the police in a positive light, nothing breaks my heart more than if you're a five-year-old saying something horrible about the police because that's what they were taught and we're teaching them something different. Changing the generation. Maybe I'm thinking too big.

The detectives in the Police Partnership work in an environment of tension and suspicion regarding their motives, exacerbated by highly controversial local and national incidents of police violence. As one detective explained, honesty and openness are the best ways to overcome this problem and establish rapport with program participants:

> Yeah because we have quite a bit officer involved shootings. So you have to.... It's like they feel like, okay, I'm in this program and I understand you guys are genuine guys, but in reality this is still going on. And they'll feel some kind of way towards law enforcement again, because of what's happening. So we just said the guys continue have to be genuine when they're out there. Just to be honest with these guys….You can ask us anything you want or anything you had to talk about. And one of the topics came up was how do you break....How can we break that barrier down? What are the police officers doing more in the community? How did we feel about the incident that happened in Memphis? We have to explain to them.

Few otherwise capable police officers are prepared to bring this kind of professionalism to their interactions with criminal offenders. Careful selection of the police officers who deliver the focused-deterrence message is essential for program success.

2. Secure support from organizational leadership

Strong and ongoing support from police and corrections leadership is necessary for implementing and sustaining programs such as the Police Partnership. Organizational leaders must endorse the value and necessity of randomized trials for evaluating program outcomes, given widespread views that some programs are inherently valuable and should be available to everyone who needs them. Strong leadership is also necessary to overcome the perceptions of such programs as soft on crime and criminals. One detective in the program lamented this attitude:

> You got certain people in leadership that care about the program and care about the things that...as far as conducting change, but some people don't. They just want to lock up, lock up, lock up, which is not going to change.

Another detective agreed that the program's objectives were not always popular:

> Oh yeah. When people look at us, we got haters out there….We have haters that feel like we'll be more effective on the street doing the same thing, the same thing that they're doing. They don't want to see us do what we do.

3. Secure support from key stakeholders

Stakeholder buy-in is also essential to the viability of programs such as the Police Partnership, especially given the logic and necessity of randomized controlled trials. Several stakeholders were involved in the Police Partnership. For example, a local judge was a strong and vocal supporter:

> A program that puts detectives into the community coupled with probation and parole to provide not only wraparound services to the participant, but a different understanding of the police department to the whole family, I think is one of the strongest programs conceivably we could come up with and that any possible areas we could make it bigger, stronger, better I think should be pursued.

The judge touted the program's benefits with other judges and referred defendants to the program, sometimes in lieu of incarceration. These defendants were usually added to the pool of eligible participants to be randomly assigned to the treatment or control condition. But in some cases, the judge requested that they be placed directly into the treatment condition, foregoing random assignment. (These individuals were excluded from the program evaluation.) Other community partners assisted participants with job training, employment, substance abuse treatment, education, and housing issues. Stakeholder buy-in can expedite participant recruitment and service delivery.

4. Secure adequate resources for program staff

Program staff must be given adequate time and resources to devote to the program. In St. Louis, police leadership changes, program staff turnover, and excessive workloads were ongoing challenges. The Police Partnership was originally staffed with six police detectives who were given time to dedicate solely to the program. As one detective explained, however, their group saw several shifts: "When we started in 2016, we had two people get shot and had to retire, forcibly retire, and had two people get promoted to Sergeant." Although staff members who left were replaced over time, changes to SLMPD leadership and staffing shortages throughout the department also meant that the program detectives had, according to a MODOC supervisor, many calls on their time:

> We've had support of the police department, but that's changed recently just because their roles have changed and they're being pulled in so many different directions. They're not as available as they used to be....The unit used to be just Police Partnership and now they have different roles that they have to fulfill for the police department. So they're not as available to us as they were in the beginning.

We recommend that researchers anticipate staffing and leadership changes and encourage organizational leaders to formalize the interagency partnership and incentivize staffing to the extent possible.

5. Leverage staff expertise

Program staff can be a vital resource in program design and implementation. They have experience and expertise that researchers do not have and should be treated as research partners. The researchers needed time to convince staff, including police and corrections officers in the St. Louis program, of the value and necessity of a randomized controlled evaluation design, but over time, it became just another aspect of the program. Corrections officers' notes from home visits were often more complete and timelier than those of the police detectives, especially later in the program, when the detectives were unable to devote as much time to the program. Program staff also had personal connections to various social services organizations and shared these resources with their own participants and one another in monthly staff meetings.

To ensure staff commitment to maintaining the integrity of such programs, researchers should make themselves readily available to program staff who have questions and concerns and meet with staff on a regular basis. Regular meetings are particularly important to ensure that coding

forms are valid and user friendly and to identify and resolve uncertainties and discrepancies as early as possible.

6. Measure change in participant attitudes toward the police and social support

Focused deterrence evaluations are typically limited to measurements of the crime rate in the community where the program is situated or, less frequently, criminal activity by individual participants. Less is known about the effects of such interventions on improving police-community relations and crime-solving, although promising research on these issues exists (RAND, 2023).

The St. Louis Police Partnership appears to have shifted participants' perceptions of the police in a more positive direction. This finding is based on a one-time staff assessment of change in participants' attitudes toward the police, measured either as they were exiting the program or at the conclusion of the study period. Thirty-four percent of the treatment participants were judged to have a more positive attitude toward the police, compared to just three percent of the control participants. To better measure attitudinal change, however, assessing participants' attitudes at the beginning of their participation in the program as well as at the end is preferable. Staff also assessed the degree of social support participants received from family, friends, and others. The majority of participants in both the treatment and control groups were judged by staff as receiving social support. Participants in the treatment group were somewhat more likely than those in the control group to receive social support, but this difference is not statistically significant. As with the measure of attitudes toward the police, the social support measure is based on a one-time staff assessment at the end of the study or when the participant exited the study.

Interviews with program staff and participants revealed that participants in the treatment group shared a considerable amount of information with and sought a significant amount of help from the police. One detective noted that program detectives were able to obtain information about a shooting in a way that "normal officers" cannot. Another detective noted that although the program is not focused on snitching, "It is true that if [a treatment participant is] caught up in something or they know something's happening in the community, sometimes they call" the detectives to give them information. Treatment participants echoed this theme. In interviews, staff also indicated that the detectives were an important source of social support for participants. One corrections officer emphasized the positive effect of better police-participant relationships:

> I think that building their relationships with the police, you're changing all future interactions that they could have with the police department. Okay, that

> is huge in itself. Them having support from....Because they don't always have it at home. If them having extra positive supports in their life, people that they can call before making a bad decision, is important because there are times where they have called them for their advice before they go do something. And that's huge because they didn't have anybody who was positive to call. The people they had in their phone would've told them to go do it. And then when they built that relationship, the resources that these detectives have that they are willing to share because they want to see them do well, impacts them.

7. Be cognizant of the safety of program staff and participants

In interviews, program staff said that they were often concerned about their own safety and the safety of their clients. Probation and parole officers reported that detectives would sometimes stop home visits early because of safety concerns, and one detective noted that he wanted "to look out for [clients], because we know once we leave, they still have to be in that environment." He didn't "want any kind of harm to come towards that family or just because [someone was] participating in the program." One probation and parole officer described an incident in which she and a detective

> were at [a] client's house and there's people just walking around everywhere. I can see that the detectives are more alert than usual, so I'm on alert then, too. I'm like, "What the hell's going on? What the hell do they see that I can't?" I remember [Detective 2] looking over and he kind of did one of these. He's like, "All right, we're going to go," and I was just like, "Okay, let's go." There's been times where I've been over there with [detectives], but I noticed that if I heard more crime in that area on the news that morning, we didn't get out of the car. The client came to us. We try to be mindful about those things.

Conducting home visits during the day with officers dressed in plain clothes and meeting with participants away from their homes are the two possible ways to ensure the safety of participants and program staff.

9. Be prepared for unexpected challenges

The practitioners and researchers involved in the St. Louis program learned to adapt to numerous unanticipated challenges during the study. These adaptations strengthened the program's implementation. For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic limited the program staff's ability to recruit the anticipated number of research participants, eligibility requirements were expanded to include probationers and parolees living outside of the city of St. Louis, those without prior firearm-related arrests, and those who entered community

supervision more than six months before recruitment. The principal investigator and research analyst met with program staff and stakeholders on multiple occasions to brainstorm ways of increasing participant identification and recruitment. Several participants were added because of those meetings. Probation and parole officers adapted to unanticipated detective staffing and safety concerns by planning in advance, sending reminders to detectives and participants, and allowing participants to choose meeting locations. Officers were also intentional about reserving several hours for batches of home visits and scheduling visits in dangerous neighborhoods during daylight hours. Sometimes MODOC officers would ask program detectives to conduct "spot checks" during their normal shifts in which they would check in on clients with issues or who had not been heard from in a while.

All field experiments involve unanticipated challenges. To effectively address these challenges, program staff and the research team must meet regularly to discuss alternative ways of meeting program and study objectives. Procedures for meeting objectives are negotiable; program objectives are not.

10. Consider limiting programming to those who are motivated to change

Some participants in the Police Partnership did not appear to be motivated by the program, and that lack of motivation restricted program implementation and effectiveness. Officers had difficulty getting in contact with some participants and motivating them to finish school, obtain IDs, and follow through with appointments. For example, during a home visit, a detective noted that one participant's lack of motivation led to stagnancy:

> [He] explain[ed] that he knows he can't be sent back to prison for not having a job or going to school. He has proven he has no interest in bettering himself because he doesn't have to. He has no motivation to do anything that would be productive in furthering his life skills and make him marketable for employment. In the future we will conduct spot checks to keep close attention to [the participant's] activities.

Several times in meetings, home visit narratives, and interviews, program staff recommended limiting program eligibility to those who appear motivated to change. As one detective explained,

> First, you got to have a person that really wants to be in the program. We talk about this in the meetings a lot, but if you have a person that really wants to be in the program, it is so much easier on us because they're willing to go take that extra step to succeed and to not reoffend. So the clients to me that want to be in the program versus the ones that are court ordered and versus the ones that they give a little resistance, those are the ones that you really want to get to.

> Those are the ones you want to be able to change their perspective, their working relationship with the police. Again, that was the whole goal for us to break down that barrier.

One of the corrections officers also emphasized the importance of active participation:

> And again, their motivation. You know you have those clients where they're going to do everything you tell them to do. They're more likely to be involved in the plans than the ones that don't have the motivation. Just like, this is stupid, they can't see past tomorrow, so it's hard for them to plan.

This recommendation has potential benefits but also drawbacks. On one hand, spending scarce program resources on individuals who are unwilling to change their behavior makes little sense. But the home visit narratives describe many participants who were initially resistant, but later turned things around in a more positive direction. A participant's motivations can change, and motivating participants to avoid the mistakes of the past and prepare for a productive, law-abiding future is an important objective of the program. The recommendation to restrict programming to only those individuals motivated to change was a common theme in our data, however. This idea should be addressed explicitly by program and research staff elsewhere.

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