

## Promoting an Operation Cease Fire Approach in Classrooms

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**Abstract:** This study explores the problem oriented and public health models of youth crime prevention and how to better promote it in the average classroom through strategies and interventions in order to reduce gun violence.

Gun violence amongst teens is a major problem in American cities. Much of this violence stems from gang activity (Braga & Weisburd, 2012). In Boston, a program to reduce gun violence called Operation Cease Fire has shown success. This model has been promoted in other major cities in the United States (Piehl, Kennedy, & Braga, 2000).

Operation Cease Fire uses a problem based public health approach to the prevention of gun violence amongst gang members. The problem of youth crime is often resolved with the help of community organizations, government agencies, and the police (Piehl et. al., 2000).

While education is important and parent teacher organizations and school police have a part to play in Operation Cease Fire (Braga, McDevitt, & Pierce, 2006), the problem is that classroom use of this project is very limited (Project MPACT, 2006). What is not clear are ways to ground the approach in the practices of an average public school classroom. This study explores the ideas behind Operation Cease Fire in order to theorize ways to support the program through the classroom, specifically through the context of Miami Dade County.

The purpose of this study is to explore a way to minimize youth violence amongst students and other youth through classroom strategies and interventions. The main research questions in this study are: What are ways that can be theorized that the average classroom can be better used to reduce gun violence in an Operation Cease Fire approach? How could these ways play out in a Miami Dade County Public Schools classroom to support the youth crime task force?

This study is important to school stakeholders such as students, teachers, and administrators because youth crime and gun violence leads to the deaths of dozens of school age youths every month in the United States of America. This study begins by exploring gun violence reduction, gun violence as a health problem, Boston's Operation Cease Fire, and the public health and problem solving models that support it. Then the methods and findings are discussed.

### Firearms Violence

The murder of young adults ages 5 to 14 has spread throughout the country and is the third leading cause of death (Edelman, 1994). For young adults 5 to 24 years old, it is the second leading cause of death. If the young adults are Black, it is the leading cause of death. More Black teens are killed by guns annually than Black teens in the past were by lynching historically. Every few days the total of individual teen deaths by guns equals the average size of a classroom. There are no national requirements for training, licensing, registration, or safe storage of guns. There is no product safety requirement for guns arguably because guns are meant to harm. There is a lack of data on gun injuries and secondary markets of guns. Self defense and recreational uses for guns could be protected while reforming national gun policy. Critics of the self defense use of guns argue that guns are often used to escalate private conflicts by people untrained in dispute resolution and often when they are angry, annoyed, tired, drunk,

or afraid. Actual use of a gun in self defense is very rare. It is more common and effective in terms of preventing injury for people to call the police or run away. At home, most people use a non firearms weapon such as a bat to protect themselves. Many people will never have the opportunity to use their guns against actual robbers, burglars, or intruders. Often guns in the home lead to the coercion and intimidation of other household members (Hemenway, 2006). Each day, guns are used in the commission of about 1000 crimes, about eight people are killed using a gun, and about sixteen people are wounded with guns (Braga & Weisburd, 2012). The U.S. rates of death and injuries due to firearms, and the rate of crimes committed with firearms, are higher than in any other high-income country with its income wealth and development.

### **Gun Violence as a Public Health Problem**

Gunshot wounds do not always lead to death or minor wound (Braga & Weisburd, 2012). Gunshot wounds result in many devastating nonlethal wounds, including traumatic brain injury and spinal cord injuries. Spinal cord injuries related to gunshot wounds tend to be more traumatic than those caused by other factors such as car accidents and falls. Gunshot wounds lead to permanent disabilities and are more likely to lead to paraplegia and complete spinal cord injury. Gunshot wounds also promote long term psychological trauma. Gunshot wounds are more likely to lead to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in children. More than half of patients treated for a gunshot would develop high levels of PTSD within a year or two of being shot. Eyewitnesses also report suffering from trauma. Economically, more than six million dollars a day are spent treating gunshot wounds nationally and the average individual gunshot wound costs 17,000 dollars to treat. Most of those costs are taken up by the U.S. tax payers. Gunshot wounds also lead to various long term costs.

### **Operation Cease Fire Project**

Now known as Operation Cease Fire, the Boston Gun Project was a problem solving policing initiative aimed at reducing homicide victimization among young people (Piehl et al., 2000). Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice, it was designed to assemble a system of an interagency working group of largely line level criminal justice and other practitioners. The project applied quantitative and qualitative research techniques to create an assessment of the nature of, and dynamics driving youth violence in Boston, developed, implemented, and evaluated an intervention designed to have a substantial near term impact on youth homicide. The project incorporated the help of the district attorney, juvenile corrections, Boston police, departments of probation and parole, school police, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and many others in the system.

The murder problem was quickly tied to a small percentage of gang members who did most of the murders and their access to new semiautomatic guns that were bought in the state through illegal trafficking (Piehl et al., 2000). Authorities used knowledge of the gangs and extensive records to go after illicit gun traffic and to stifle the gang beefs that often started violence. Gangs were informed that violence would not be accepted and that they were under constant focus by police, special mediation workers who met them on the street, and by other stakeholders through formal meetings, police contact, and individual meetings. Disputes and issues amongst gang members were settled through the help of parole officers, social services, and street mediators. When gang members committed violence, gangs were challenged on all legal fronts through custom interventions for particular individuals and groups. The long sustained attention put on gangs could involve minor as well as large violations such as arrests for drinking and using unregistered cars. The message was sent that if they wanted the attention to stop, gangs would have to stop the violence. This strategy led to several fewer murders each

month. The working group running Operation Cease Fire would meet regularly to improve the intervention (Piehl et al., 2000). With the Boston Gun project, a central idea emerged that gun violence worked in self-perpetuating cycles. After frequent cycles of street violence, a small number of youth at risk were using protective behaviors such as attaining a gun, using a gun, forming a gang, using violent behavior, and other behaviors that could spur another cycle of street violence. A meaningful period of substantially reduced youth violence might serve as a “firebreak” and result in a relatively long-lasting reduction in future youth violence. Interrupting the cycle meant that a less violent period could emerge and it was possible that less energy and resources could be used as deterrents. It was easier to keep the peace once the violence cycle was interrupted. Long term, it could lead to a lasting reduction in violence (Braga et al., 2000).

The Boston Gun Project served as a template for other communities grappling with gang violence (Tita, Riley, Ridgeway, & Greenwood 2005) including Sacramento (Wakeling, Gilbert, Dunham, & de Leon, 2012), Los Angeles and Indiana (Braga & Weisburd, 2012). The working group in Operation Cease Fire Los Angeles served as a forum for different private and public agencies to collaborate and to pool effectively the different resources they had. Operation Cease Fire in Los Angeles had community support in part because it focused on the crime and not necessarily on young people being in a gang. Mapping out where the gangs were and understanding the networking of the gangs was important. Understanding and learning about the gangs and their relationship to violence was critical. In Los Angeles, it was clear that there were hot spots or places where violence would build. As a deterrent to violence in those areas, uniform police would do weekly patrols of target area parks, housing developments, and communities. A fence was placed in the alleyway of a regular shooting scene so that entry and escape from the area was made more difficult, and speed bumps were placed to slow down traffic. The housing authority inspected properties violent gang members were prone to use as hideouts (Tita et al., 2005). Critics of the Boston Gun project argue that Boston gangs were relatively small and structured compared to Los Angeles and Chicago and that Operation Cease Fire took credit for many business as usual raids they did not initiate (Piehl et al., 2000). Operation Cease Fire has been acclaimed for the reduction in gun violence in Boston, but researchers feel that since it uses a quasi-experimental approach to evaluate their work, it is hard to determine how much gun violence reduction is due to the project and how much is due to other factors. It is difficult to create a randomized control trial group to test against (Braga & Weisburd, 2012). Operation Cease Fire is based on two models: The problem solving model and the public health model.

### **Problem Solving Model**

The problem solving model of policing uses an understanding of the environment and factors of a problem to solve a problem with the use of traditional and non-traditional resources (Braga, et. al., 2006). An understanding of local gangs and associated gang violence is needed, for example, so that responses can be logically linked to the nature of the youth gun violence problem. A major factor in solving the problem is in determining how the problem is understood. Unfortunately, research has demonstrated that problem analysis is usually shallow. Police officers often conduct only a superficial analysis of problems and then rush to implement responses based on their own experiences. Police are good at identifying problems but have difficulty clearly defining problems, dissecting problems, properly using data sources, incorporating non-police information resources (such as hospitals, schools, and businesses), conducting comprehensive analyses, and implementing analysis-driven responses.

The Department of Justice uses funding to support community outreach effort by hiring prosecutors, investigators, and trainers to address problems (Braga et al., 2008). District attorneys can hire and work with academic research partners to help understand and address serious gun related problems in their districts. In the city of Lowell, Massachusetts, a U.S. District attorney hired researchers from Harvard University and Northeastern University to work closely with criminal justice practitioners in Lowell to assess the nature of the city's homicide and serious nonfatal gun violence problem. The research finds that homicide and serious gun violence is highly concentrated among a small number of gangs involved and highly active youth offenders. An interagency criminal justice working group, with support and involvement from social services and the community, was developed to focus prevention, intervention, and enforcement resources on this risky group of individuals responsible for the bulk of Lowell violence. The problem analysis research also revealed that most gang conflicts were personal and vendetta-like. Money issues and drug business did not cause as much violence as much as a cycle of retaliation amongst groups with a history of antagonism. There was also an ethnic dimension as Asian and Hispanic gangs had different kinds of disputes.

### **The Public Health Model**

Traditional medical practice and traditional law enforcement model is reactive and deals with one person at a time (Braga & Weisburd, 2012). Doctors treat the patient after they have the disease. Police officers often try to solve the crime after it has been committed to an individual. Although prevention is part of law enforcement, much of its energy is focused on apprehending and arresting someone after a crime. By contrast, the goal of public health is neither to determine fault nor to punish perpetrators or curing a disease after a patient has it. Public health focuses directly on prevention--eliminating the problem before something bad happens. Epidemiology is about identifying the risk factors, trends, and causes of health problems. The public health approach then tries to organize the community into an effort of public interest to apply scientific and technical knowledge to address the causes of these health problems. With a public health approach, gun violence could be the health problem and epidemiology is used to identify the causes and the community is used to solve the problem before it manifests itself. In public health, prevention is preferable to treatment, alterations in the environment are more likely to be effective than attempts to change individual behaviors, and multiple strategies directed toward different risk factors are necessary to solve the problem. Changing the environment where firearms violence is triggered can mean promoting policies that improve parenting skills, channel anger, or reduce racism and injustice. Policies that reduce alcohol and drug problems can help prevent both intentional and unintentional gunshot injuries (Wakeling et al., 2012). Pulling all the levers is a phrase that describes the use of multiple strategies to deal with violence (Braga & Weisburd, 2012). In Sacramento, targeted groups of probationers and parolees were also urged to take advantage of a range of social services and opportunities including employment, mentoring, housing, substance abuse treatment, and vocational training (Wakeling et al., 2012).

### **Miami Dade County Public Schools**

In 2000, the Miami Dade County Public schools (MDCPS) system pushed to be declared a unitary district having arguably eliminated all de jure segregation, equalized facilities and transportation, and complied with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although schools were legally desegregated as they could be by the school system, many schools remain racially isolated due to residential segregation. A huge degree of White flight from south Florida communities occurred just as a Cuban population was growing and avoiding many issues that other Hispanic groups

face. Minority students such as Blacks and (non Cuban) Hispanics generally experience higher poverty rates, suffer from a variety of health problems, endure greater learning difficulties due to limited English proficiency, encounter school values and behaviors that often conflict with their minority community, and have lower levels of academic achievement and educational attainment compared to the White population. Blacks and Black Hispanics suffer from a higher degree of spatial separation. This isolates them more from mainstream culture. Isolated Black and Hispanic communities have a greater risk of experiencing poverty, unemployment, teenage pregnancies, and educational failure (Moore, 2004). According to Collier (1998), MDCPS schools have had cultures of denial when it comes to violence and crime in schools. Miami gangs are small in number but they are growing. Few females are in gangs. Most gang members stop their activity at 18 when they could be treated as an adult. Schools with violent cultures allowed the bad crime environment around school to enter the school itself. In the eyes of students, a teachers' authority in a larger school disciplinary process is often limited, marginalized, and undermined by school security and administration leading to more classroom misbehavior (Collier, 1998).

### **Miami Youth Crime Prevention**

In 2010, the Miami Police department street gang section identified 261 Gang members, conducted 659 field interviews, arrested 42 Gang members, recovered 7 firearms, seized \$10,701 in U.S. currency, and produced 20 Flyers/Intelligence Bulletins through a Gang Information Clearinghouse (MDPD Narcotic Bureau, 2011). A Multi Agency Gang Task Force conducted 12 sweeps and made 145 arrests that included 72 felonies, 60 misdemeanors, 15 warrants and 4 traffic violations. 16 weapons, 301.3 grams of marijuana, and 166.5 grams of cocaine were also seized.

Miami Dade County's version of Operation Cease Fire is a system of stakeholders, agencies, and services that work around the Youth Crime Task Force ([YCTF] YCTF, 2012). The YCTF worked as an independent institution but in recent years was transformed into a kind of advisory board to local government. Miami Dade County offers its troubled youth various programs that could be of assistance. The 12 and Under Project for example provides services to identified high-risk boys with special issues and needs who have been assessed at the Juvenile Assessment Center as being under twelve years and in conflict with parents and the law. Family Intervention Services provides community- and home-based Functional Family Therapy, targeting children age 17 years and under, who are diverted from Juvenile Court and under the supervision of the Juvenile Services Department. Juvenile Weapons Offender Program is for under age 18 youths adjudicated on non-violent weapons charges. These offenders are confronted by the traumatic physical, emotional, and financial consequences of violence on victims and their families. The Improving Community Control program for adjudicated youths under age 18 is designed to improve self-esteem, school performance, and pro-social bonding through institutions such as Concerned African Women and Regis House. Alternative programs include: Family and Child Empowerment, Post Detention Girls' Program, Serious Habitual Offender - Sibling Model Program, and the Teen Drug Court program.

The Miami Partnership for Action in Communities task force ([MPACT] MPACT, 2006) is a school based gang intervention program. They gather resources to combat gang violence into the school of a targeted area. The project demonstrates that students given an opportunity to become productive citizens will be less likely to turn towards crime. Their minds are cultivated with the learning and application of marketable job skills. An on the job training program allows at risk youths to learn carpentry theory in school and then work for hourly wages at a

construction site. Youths learn a trade that bolsters self esteem, the builder gets free labor since a local agency funds the work while mentoring and teaching them, a low income family get to own a home for the first time and the community is enhanced. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Comprehensive gang model has been used in other states. Schools use five strategies: social interventions, opportunities provision, organizational change, suppression, and community mobilization. The district is also trying to get these students to do the maintenance, building, and repairs of schools in the school district.

### **Method**

This conceptual study explores the problem oriented public health model of youth crime prevention and how to better promote it in the classroom through strategies and interventions in order to reduce gun violence.

### **Data Collection**

The focus was on literature related to the way Operation Cease Fire was used in Boston, Sacramento, Los Angeles, and Miami Dade County. Literature was collected using databases such as Google scholar and Eric with the key terms “Operation Cease Fire” and “Boston Gun Project”. The websites and available documents of these specific programs were also studied. The sample was purposively limited to these projects because these projects represent the work of a metropolis similar to Miami in terms of environment, demographics, size of school district, and access to social services, these projects specifically deal with Operation Cease Fire, and because these projects are role models for the work of other cities. Data was collected through note taking

### **Data Analysis**

The data on the Boston Gun Project and Operation Cease Fire in Los Angeles, Sacramento, and Miami were analyzed for common themes. The data on Miami was also analyzed in order to list what resources were available. Then through a brainstorming process notes were taken on how these themes could lead to the use of classroom strategies and interventions. Lists were developed and made into themes that were used to theorize an answer to the main research question: What are ways that can be theorized that the classroom can be better used to reduce gun violence in an Operation Cease Fire approach? The common themes were then constantly compared to available resources in Miami’s Operation Cease Fire project and brainstorming was done again for the second research question: How could these ways play out in a Miami Dade County Public Schools classroom to support the Youth Crime Task Force?

### **Findings**

Nine themes were developed. The theme *defining problems and solutions* refers to figuring out of what is wrong and what can be done to correct or prevent the wrong. The theme *triggers* includes the issues or events that make violence happen. The theme *violence alternatives and violence consequences* refers to the options to avoid violence and what happens after violence. The theme *communication* includes the dialogue and information sharing that is needed throughout the community to stop gun violence. The theme *focus* refers to the depth of attention put to an action and the consequences that follow. The theme *geographies* includes the contexts and environments where gun violence occurs. The theme *social services* refers to the resources available to help anyone in the community. The theme *community response* includes how various institutions and individuals respond to violence and work to prevent violence from reoccurring.

**What are ways that can be theorized that the classroom can be better used to reduce gun violence in an Operation Cease Fire approach?**

Schools need better links to the violence prevention community at this stage. They are often asked to help solve a problem after police have defined and solved it themselves. Micro acts of conflict happen in classrooms everyday. Schools should have mechanisms for sharing knowledge of individual student behaviors and their triggers with counselors and staff but also with people in the crime prevention loop. As an alternative, schools should have a one stop center of information about after school programs such as the YMCA and the public library. Activities should round out the calendar so that there is no time for mischief. Violence consequences can be mapped out through graphic organizers. Schools should have anonymous ways students and staff can discuss gang issues in school and through out the community without fear of retaliation from gangs. Schools should record graffiti, tagging, phrases, and other paraphernalia instead of just discouraging it. It may be gang related and useful information. Students should research and learn about different surrounding communities including gang areas. Schools should work with partners to maintain a list of available social services and explain them to parents and students. Schools should be involved in rallies and protests against gun violence.

#### **How could these ways play out in a MDCPS classroom to support the YCTF?**

MDCPS and YCTF should have better links to the academic community at the problem and solution stage and throughout all stages of the crime prevention process. This means not only a link to students and teachers in the classroom but researchers at the university level too. A teacher can discuss problem identifying and solving with students through think aloud strategies. A way to speak with anonymity is needed for school workers since there is a culture of denial of violence in MDCPS that could lead to retaliation against people who speak out. Workers who mediate gang violence should discuss violence triggers in the classroom. MDCPS should partner with other institutions to train these workers and staff and students who may be able to help out in their community in an informal way. Former gang members and doctors that deal with gunshot wounds should speak at all classrooms. Discussing gang activities should be done regularly and not as a one time event. Better information is gained if students are allowed to own the conversation and open questions are used. When the YCTF asks the community to focus attention on gang members after a crime, someone from the school of each member should be having a talk with those students. If the student is frequently out of the school, a representative of MDCPS should go to the home along with other YCTF partners. Schools can map out hot spots of delinquency as a project and share this knowledge. Classes can map out factors in the community that lead to violence such as high poverty areas as a lesson. MDCPS should promote a one stop center for social services by having institutions come to the schools at times working parents are free to attend. MDCPS should partner with institutions to offer gang related services such as tattoo removal. Project MPACT should improve the schools but also surrounding areas.

#### **Conclusion**

This study offers ways that youth crime prevention can be better linked to the classroom by exploring some projects and available local resources. This study highlights the issue and sets up an informative base for future work. More detailed work is needed on how these ideas can come to practice in the challenging contexts of local schools. Future research should focus on how well specific schools handle youth crime prevention. In conclusion, this study explored ways to use the classroom, MDCPS, and YCTF to prevent gun violence in a better way.

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