

Focused Deterrence in Depth – Rand Corporation

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“Belief in the deterrent efficacy of penal sanctions is as old as the criminal law itself. It has informed and does inform political, administrative, and judicial policy to so great a degree that deterrence has been described a ‘primary and essential postulate’ of almost all criminal law systems.”

– *Zimring and Hawkins, 1973, p. 1*

“In either case, he will look to the future, not the past: for as Plato says, ‘no wise man punishes any one because he has sinned, but that he may sin no more: for what is past cannot be recalled, but what is to come may be checked.’”

– *Seneca, circa 40–65 (trans. 1912)*

There is a long history and variety of deterrents that have been used throughout the ages (e.g., Wines, 1895, pp. 48–103). The underlying assumption is that crime rates will be lower when the benefits do not outweigh the costs of committing a crime, as perceived by the offender (Braga and Weisburd, 2012a).

Focused deterrence, also called “pulling levers,” is a focused strategy that attempts to deter specific criminal behavior through fear of specific sanctions (or “levers”), as well as anticipation of benefits for not engaging in crime.

With focused deterrence, the police and representatives from the community engage with those at high risk of being a party to violence and convey clear incentives for avoiding violence and deterrents for engaging in violence. On the incentive side, targeted offenders receive

information about and access to various services, such as job training and drug treatment (Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy, undated). On the deterrence side, these individuals receive information on the enhanced penalties that they and their peers will face if there are subsequent violent incidents. These penalties will range from focused and enhanced prosecution for the violent crimes to arrests and other penalties for any low-level offense (drug trafficking, illegal gambling, etc.) subsequently committed by the parties involved. Beyond the use of carrots and sticks, focused deterrence initiatives attempt to decrease the opportunities that individuals have to commit violence, make the local community a partner in deflecting individuals away from crime, and improve police-community relations (Braga and Weisburd, 2012a, p. 26).

There are several variants of focused deterrence. Recent evidence (Braga, Weisburd, and Turchan, 2018) suggests that variants that seek to dissuade criminal groups (e.g., gangs) from engaging in violence are most effective, so this essay is focused on those variants. Variants that strictly seek to deter individuals (as opposed to gangs) are less effective. Variants that seek to dissuade drug selling are even less effective, although Braga, Weisburd, and Turchan found that almost half the drug-focused initiatives had severe implementation problems and that the drug-focused initiatives that did not report such severe problems had better results.

Equity (real and perceived fairness) is a major topic for today's policing to consider in any program that attempts to target a specific demographic via such an intervention as deterrence. Equity is crucial for long-term sustainability and for the support of those expected to partake in the incentive side of focused deterrence. A more detailed discussion on these issues can be found in Saunders et al. (2016).

The National Network for Safe Communities (2016) provides a detailed guidebook on the core model for conducting focused deterrence for groups, [the Group Violence Intervention \(PDF\)](#), which is an updated version of Boston's Operation Ceasefire model for focused deterrence. The Network also provides an implementation guide on the core model for deterring open-air drug dealing, [the Drug Market Intervention \(2015\) \(PDF\)](#).

The rest of this essay highlights resources and activities to run focused deterrence interventions successfully.

Agencies' Organizational Needs to Run Focused Deterrence

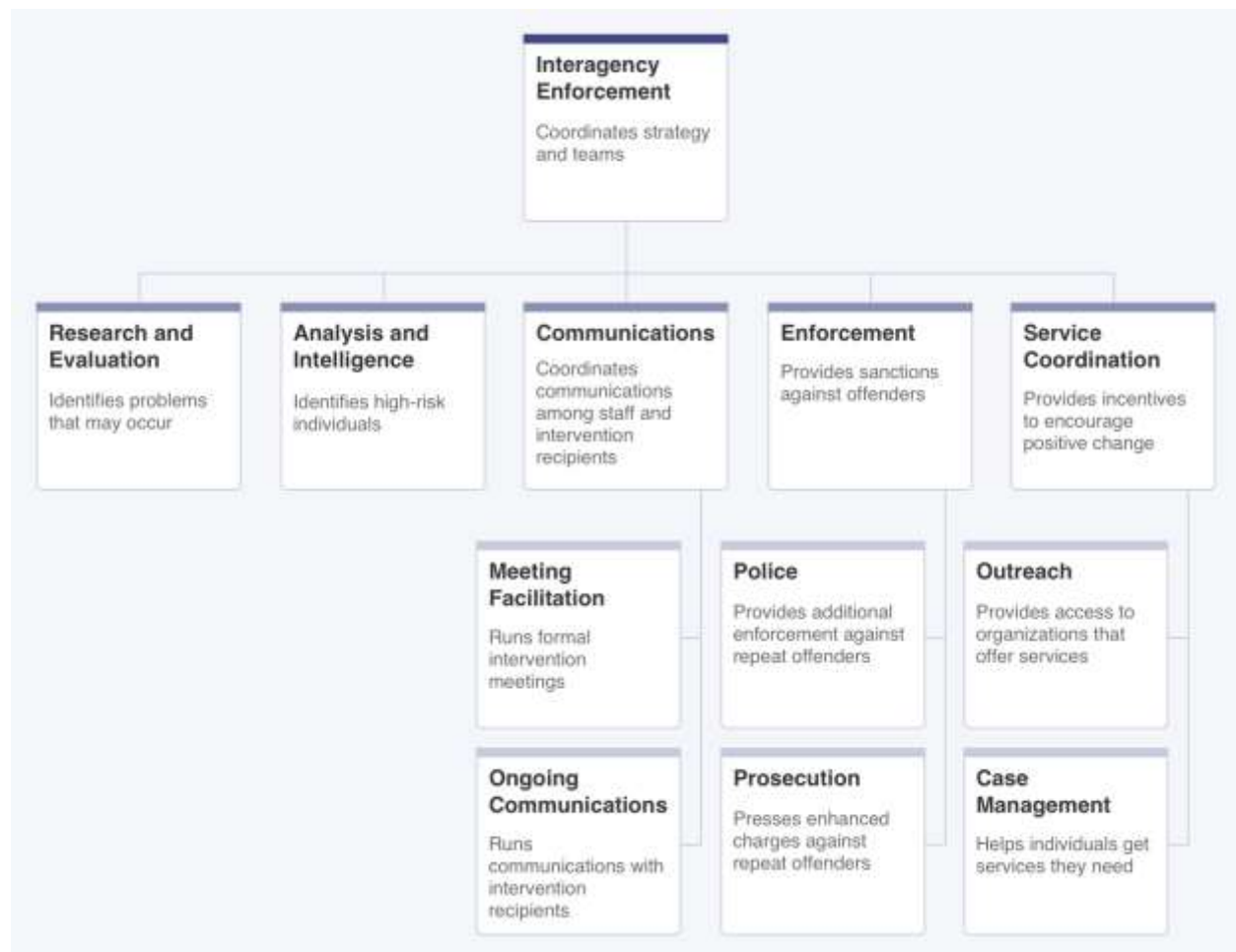
An agency wanting to use a focused deterrence strategy will need the following staff (adapted from Braga and Weisburd, 2015, p. 57):

- **an interagency enforcement group** that will coordinate the strategy and the teams
- **a research and evaluation group** that will track how well the strategy is working and identify and help resolve problems
- **an analysis and intelligence team** that will identify which offenders are at sufficiently high risk of violence to be included in the intervention

- **a team that will run communications efforts** with intervention recipients and groups, divided into
 - those who will run formal intervention meetings
 - those who will run ongoing communications with intervention recipients and those in the community monitoring them
- **a team that carries out enforcement efforts** against offenders and offending groups; the team includes both law enforcement and prosecutors (who bring enhanced charges for groups and persons that persist in criminal behavior)
- **a team that coordinates providing services** to individuals who choose to make a positive change away from violence and crime, including individuals who serve as
 - outreach links to community organizations and other agencies that will provide the services
 - case managers who will help individuals get the services they need.

This hierarchy of teams for a focused deterrence strategy is illustrated in Figure 1. Another source for guidance on group violence is the extensive guide prepared by the National Network for Safe Communities (2016).

Figure 1. An Organizational Structure for Focused Deterrence



- **Interagency Enforcement**
Coordinates strategy and teams
- **Research and Evaluation**
Identifies problems that may occur
- **Analysis and Intelligence**
Identifies high-risk individuals
- **Communications**
Coordinates communications among staff and intervention recipients
- **Meeting Facilitation**
Runs formal intervention meetings
- **Ongoing Communications**
Runs communications with intervention recipients
- **Enforcement**
Provides sanctions against offenders
- **Police**
Provides additional enforcement against repeat offenders
- **Prosecution**
Presses enhanced charges against repeat offenders
- **Service Coordination**
Provides incentives to encourage positive change
- **Outreach**
Provides access to organizations that offer services
- **Case Management**
Helps individuals get services they need

The Process of Focused Deterrence

There are five key tasks typically involved in focused deterrence

1. [Find those at risk of being involved with violence](#)
2. [Hold an intervention meeting](#)
3. [Provide services to those who want to change](#)
4. [Have community members provide ongoing support](#)
5. [Enhance enforcement for persons and groups that persist in crime](#)

This is not the only way to run focused deterrence interventions, but more-successful interventions reviewed by RAND frequently included these steps (see [Analyzing the Evidence for Focused Deterrence](#)).

Step 1. Find Those at Risk of Being Involved with Violence

The original approach to identifying those at risk is to first conduct group audits with community leaders and area police to identify groups and conflicts seen as driving most violence in a jurisdiction. These audits are followed by collecting information from frontline

officers on different details (patrol, gang, vice, etc.) and tips from the community to identify “power players” believed to be driving criminal activity (see, for example, National Network for Safe Communities, 2016, pp. 25–33).

While this sounds straightforward, agencies need to keep equity and civil rights protections and considerations in mind, answering the following questions:

- Who is involved in identifying those at risk, especially individuals? How?
- What are the processes used?
- What are the criteria for selection?

Tip: Selection of individuals for focused deterrence interventions must be logical, defensible, and based on clear criteria on why the individual might pose a major threat to the community.

- What are the protections and procedures in place to ensure that the selection process and criteria are used correctly?

Step 2. Hold an Intervention Meeting

For focused deterrence to work, the targeted criminal population must be aware of the deterrence strategy. Boston's Operation Ceasefire (Braga and Weisburd, 2015) provides a commonly used template for focused deterrence meetings. The specific format was designed for interventions with the members of multiple gangs, or of a specified gang collectively, but can also be tailored to individuals. The general elements include the following:

- The venue could vary: The Operation Ceasefire team interacted with gang members in formal meetings or through individual meetings—wherever they could find the targeted individuals and have a discussion with them.
- Typical participants in the intervention meetings, beside police and social services representatives, include family members, families of crime victims (e.g., mothers, grandmothers of murder victims), or other influential community members, all attempting to persuade high-risk individuals to desist from engaging in violence and other serious crimes.
- The first message is to say that business as usual and violence are no longer acceptable and that law enforcement will use every legal lever to reduce the targeted activities.
 - A key part of the message is that penalties for continued violence would occur immediately, with organizers presenting evidence (e.g., video footage of group members committing crimes) and likely consequences (e.g., unsigned arrest warrants to be signed if violence continues).
 - Examples of punishments given to prior gangs that continued violence can be used as deterrents to gangs that could be next; a typical example would be going over the enhanced prosecution (and lengthy sentences) of several members of one highly violent gang.
 - To support this part of the message, agencies typically investigate the individuals to find evidence of serious crimes for which the group might be prosecuted. They might also work with federal authorities to identify federal offenses, which have the advantage of putting individuals at risk of being sent to remote federal correctional facilities.

- The second message, delivered jointly with multiple voices (e.g., gang outreach, probation, parole, churches, and other community groups), offers services and support.

Tip: An example of the message to be relayed is, “You are very important to the community, but violence will no longer be tolerated. You need to stop. If you do, we will provide you with every support we can. If you do not, we will throw every legal lever we have at you, with the full support of the community.”

Step 3. Provide Services to Those Who Want to Change

All studies reviewed by Braga and Weisburd offered their respective populations various services, such as job training, drug abuse treatment, and assistance in housing, as incentives for turning away from violence (Braga and Weisburd, 2012b, p. 350). The services component of focused deterrence tends to be the least covered in practice, which is unfortunate because incentives for desisting from violence are as important as sanctions for disobedience. A suite of services could include the following (which is not intended to be a complete list):

- counseling
- substance abuse treatment
- housing
- education
- employment training and placement
- help in obtaining identification cards (including a driver’s license, a non-driver state identification card, or a social security card)
- community corrections (if applicable)
- Veterans Affairs benefits (for individuals who are veterans).

Tip: There is a strong need for case managers to work with at-risk individuals and providers to ensure that the individuals receive the services they need. There is also a need for staff who conduct outreach to service providers to help make services available. These providers collectively ensure that someone is there to answer the individuals’ calls for help and that the individuals get the help they need quickly.

Beyond individual case and service outreach managers, there is also a need for an interagency and inter-service group to help coordinate all providers working together on providing services effectively (see, for example, Braga and Weisburd, 2015, p. 59).

Step 4. Have Community Members Provide Ongoing Support

A key aspect of focused deterrence is ongoing support and monitoring of at-risk individuals from the community, beyond the influence of law enforcement and social services. Unfortunately, these activities are not commonly documented, so it is difficult to provide an overall assessment of them. That said, community support plays the key role of helping

continue the intervention when law enforcement is not present. From our review of focused deterrence studies, examples of community members who provide this support include

- family members and friends
- community organizations (churches, nonprofit groups, schools)
- other criminally involved individuals or syndicate members who want to avoid trouble.

Tip: In the example case studies, the involvement of older syndicate members was intended to create peer pressure on high-risk members to desist from engaging in violence. The older members were told that their entire syndicate would be targeted for increased enforcement if they did not control their younger, more-violent members.

Step 5. Enhance Enforcement for Persons and Groups That Persist in Crime

Tip: The following actions are intended strictly for individuals engaging in violence after being warned. They are not meant as general punishments of residents in communities with violent gangs. Before taking enhanced actions, officers need to confirm that they are engaging with focused deterrence targets. For more on the risks of and alternatives to zero tolerance, see our [guide to that strategy](#).

Actions taken against persons and groups that persist in crime are intended to sanction them swiftly, with certainty and proportionality. Examples of enhanced enforcements against individuals who carried out violent attacks after being warned include the following:

- **airing unwanted publicity** in the media—e.g., videos of gang roundups, discussions on local radio and television news
- **prioritizing prosecutions** of the violent offenders—ideally in the federal system, which most isolates the violent from the community
- **subjecting offenders to stricter pretrial sanctions** (no bond, etc.)
- **subjecting offenders to stricter sentencing.**

Examples of enhanced enforcement for groups with members continuing violent attacks after being warned include the following:

- **prioritizing service of any outstanding warrants** to group members
- **making other law enforcement contacts with group members on a regular basis**
- **disrupting and sanctioning the group for committing low-level crimes**, such as low-level drug activity, public substance use, and trespassing
- **prioritizing collection of law enforcement intelligence** against the group, to gain evidence of additional crimes for prosecution.

A major purpose of these sanctions is future deterrence. Agencies typically publicize the sanctions against groups and persons with the media; they also emphasize the sanctions in

future intervention meetings as examples of what could happen if individuals do not change course.

Additional Tips

Be careful when identifying the criminal behavior being directly targeted and the objectives of the intervention. Our analysis of past focused deterrence studies found some evidence that agencies tended to get positive results on what they targeted directly. This means that interventions to reduce drug trafficking tended to reduce drug incidents, whereas interventions to reduce violence were better associated with reducing violence.

Tip: Agencies that want to use focused deterrence to reduce gang violence should focus their intervention meetings and other efforts on deterring future violence as opposed to, for example, deterring drug activity and hoping for an indirect effect on violence.

Resist the temptation to declare early victories and end the law enforcement effort.

Tip: Focused deterrence is intended to be a permanent part of a department's strategies to deter violence, not a pilot project. A future challenge for research and evaluation is to assess the long-term effects of focused deterrence strategies.

Analyzing the Evidence for Focused Deterrence

A systematic review of focused deterrence strategies by Braga and Weisburd (2012a) suggests that these kinds of policies do, indeed, have significant positive effects on crime. As reported, of the ten eligible studies reviewed, nine showed that focused deterrence had led to a significant decline in at least some type of crime. Braga and Weisburd noted that all ten of the studies used nonrandomized quasi-experimental designs and that this was a concern (2012a, p. 25).¹

We conducted an additional review of the ten studies, attempting to see whether there were some common attributes associated with interventions that worked better (or worse). We tagged which evaluated site had which attribute and used a machine-learning method (hierarchical clustering)² to identify groups of sites that had similar attributes. The machine-learning algorithm divided the studies into four groups. Table 1 presents common attributes for each group and how much, on average, violent crime was reduced for sites within each group.³

Table 1. Attributes Shared by Groups of Sites, by Percentage

Group Description	Violence Deterrence (designed as a near-exact copy of Boston's Operation Ceasefire)	Formal Intervention Meetings	High-Fidelity Copy of Boston's Operation Ceasefire	Ongoing Community Support	Average Reduction in Violent Crime
"High-Fidelity Boston's Operation Ceasefire Replications" (4 sites) Committed efforts to copy the Operation Ceasefire anti-gang violence effort almost exactly, just with some local tailoring	100	100	100	100	32
"Other Comprehensive Strategies" (2 sites) Committed focused deterrence efforts not directly copying Operation Ceasefire	100	10	0	50	30
"Partial Efforts" (2 sites) Efforts inspired by Boston's Operation Ceasefire, but whose study descriptions described agencies unable or unwilling to implement major components of the strategy	100	0	0	0	7
"Drug Focus" (2 sites) Efforts that focused on deterring individuals from drug dealing	0	100	0	0	0

The attributes we identified for analysis captured whether the studies' intervention descriptions included the following:

- an intervention focused on deterring violence or deterring an alternative, notably drug dealing
- formal intervention meetings
- an intervention that attempted to precisely duplicate Boston's Operation Ceasefire with high fidelity (if not, then another intervention model or an intervention inspired by Boston's Operation Ceasefire but reportedly missing major components)
- community members being explicitly tasked to monitor and support individuals in some way.

As shown in Table 1, sites that (1) attempted to precisely duplicate Boston's Operation Ceasefire or had an alternate comprehensive strategy, (2) explicitly deterred violence (rather than drug dealing), (3) had formal intervention meetings, and (4) leveraged some form of ongoing community support for individuals outside of police presence did significantly better, on average, than those that did not.⁴

Notes

1. In a true randomized experiment of a focused deterrence strategy, one would need to create a control group of about half of the highest-risk offenders who would not receive any interventions. Departments typically were unwilling to avoid taking actions on the highest-risk individuals, requiring alternate experimental designs. [Return to content](#)
2. For a reference on hierarchical clustering, see Manning, Raghavan, and Schütze (2008). Wessa (2017) was used to run hierarchical clustering. [Return to content](#)
3. The studies reported two types of crime reductions. The first type was reduced crime within high-crime areas or with high-risk populations. The second was reduced crime for an entire region. To make the two outcomes roughly consistent for presentation in the table, reported drops in crime for high-risk areas and populations were reduced by 50 percent to make them more comparable to entire regions. (This is based on industry agreement that actionable hot spots generally contain around 50 percent of a jurisdiction's crime.) [Return to content](#)
4. The differences in the average crime reductions across groups are statistically significant; a one-way Analysis of Variance test rejected the null hypothesis that the averages were the same, with $Pr(>F) = 0.005$. The algorithm was implemented using the Wessa web interface to R (Wessa, 2017); the merging method used was Ward's method (1963), which is the Wessa default and produces "spherical" clusters, consistent with different clusters of records representing overarching types or classes. [Return to content](#)

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