

**Evaluation of Baltimore's *Safe Streets* Program:
Effects on Attitudes, Participants' Experiences, and Gun Violence**

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January 11, 2012



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Protecting Health, Saving Lives—*Millions at a Time*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

In 1995, Dr. Gary Slutkin of the University of Illinois at Chicago developed the *CeaseFire* program to reduce youth violence associated with firearms. *CeaseFire* is a multifaceted intervention involving several different components. Most notably, street outreach workers – often former gang members – develop relationships with high risk youth in high crime urban areas. Outreach workers serve as positive role models for the young people, steering them to resources such as job or educational training. Special outreach staff called violence interrupters work to identify and resolve potentially dangerous conflicts before they escalate into shootings. In addition, the program organizes community responses to shootings and attempts to change social norms surrounding shootings, sending the message that using a gun to resolve conflict is unacceptable. An independent evaluation by researchers at Northwestern University found strong evidence that the program led to significant reductions in gun violence. A grant from the U.S. Department of Justice enabled the Baltimore City Health Department (BCHD) to attempt to replicate Chicago’s *CeaseFire* in Baltimore under the name *Safe Streets*.

Evaluation

The evaluation has four major components: 1) a review of implementation data for the program; 2) an analysis of the effects of the program on homicides and nonfatal shootings; 3) a community survey of attitudes toward gun violence; and 4) interviews with *Safe Streets* program participants to ascertain their perceptions of the program’s effects on their lives.

Program Implementation

BCHD solicited proposals from community based organizations interested in implementing the program in some of Baltimore’s most violent neighborhoods. *Safe Streets* was initially launched in the McElderry Park neighborhood of East Baltimore in June 2007 and in the Union Square neighborhood of Southwest Baltimore in August 2007. However, the Union Square community group experienced substantial problems implementing the program, failing to establish a stable group of outreach workers until March 2008. But program implementation problems continued and Union Square’s contract was discontinued in July 2008. Additional program sites were added later. Elwood Park’s program was fully implemented as of March 2008, Madison-Eastend as of January 2009, and Cherry Hill as of January 2009.

Program staff were required to keep standard records of their activities including detailed information about each incident mediated by outreach staff. Monthly totals and conflict mediation forms were reported to BCHD and shared with the research team. After the initial months of enrolling participants, program sites had 35 to 60 participants connected with outreach workers at any given time and recorded 127 to 271 participant contacts per month.

A key approach to reducing violence was for program outreach workers to mediate conflicts between individuals or groups in attempt at reaching a nonviolent resolution. From July 2007 through December 2010, *Safe Streets* outreach workers mediated 276 incidents. Nearly 9 out of 10 (88%) of these incidents involved individuals with a history of violence and 75% involved gang members. Weapons were at the scene in nearly two thirds of the incidents. Based on these conditions and other factors, outreach workers thought that 84% of the situations in which they intervened would have either “very likely” (59.5%) or “likely” (24.6%) led to a shooting. Outreach workers considered the situation to have been successfully resolved (avoiding serious violence) in 69% of the incidents and at least temporarily resolved in an additional 23% of the cases. The average number of incidents mediated per month ranged from 1.2 in Madison-Eastend to 4.0 in McElderry Park. Cherry Hill mediated an average of 3.2 incidents per month and Elwood Park mediated 1.4 incidents monthly.

Program Effects on Homicide and Nonfatal Shootings

We obtained data from the Baltimore Police Department for homicides and nonfatal shootings from January 1, 2003 to December 31, 2010. We compared changes in the number of homicide and nonfatal shooting incidents per month in the intervention neighborhoods with high-crime comparison areas (police posts) without the intervention. To be a comparison area, the police post must have been in the top 25% among all posts for the number of homicides and nonfatal shootings from 2003 to 2006. Regression models were used to control for several possible confounders including measures of police initiatives directed at reducing neighborhood gun violence, arrests for weapon and drug violations, and baseline levels of homicide and nonfatal shootings.

In Cherry Hill, *Safe Streets* was associated with statistically significant reductions of 56% in homicide incidents and 34% in nonfatal shootings. Program effects in the three East Baltimore sites varied. McElderry Park did not experience a homicide during the first 22 months of program implementation (prior homicide levels in the area and citywide trends projected five homicides in McElderry Park for that period without the intervention). However, homicides increased during the period when program supervisors and staff also concerned themselves with a new *Safe Streets* site in bordering Madison-Eastend where gang violence surged. During the months McElderry Park’s program was running without the near-by Madison-Eastend program, homicides were 53% lower than would have been expected without the intervention. However, there were no program effects on homicides or nonfatal shootings in McElderry Park during the months when Madison-Eastend’s program was operating. Both Elwood Park and Madison-Eastend’s *Safe Streets* interventions were associated with statistically significant reductions in nonfatal shootings (-34% and -44%, respectively). However, homicides were nearly three times higher than would have been expected during the 18-month period the program was in operation in Madison-Eastend. There was also evidence that positive programs extended into areas bordering the neighborhoods that implemented *Safe Streets*.

Totaling statistically significant program effects across all the program sites and border posts we estimate that the program was associated with 5.4 fewer homicide incidents and 34.6 fewer nonfatal shooting incidents during 112 cumulative months of intervention post observations. There would have been more than 10 additional homicide incidents prevented had

there not been significant increases in Madison-Eastend and in the area bordering Elwood Park that coincided with program implementation.

Youths' Attitudes About Gun Violence

To assess the effects of *Safe Streets* on attitudes about the appropriateness of using a gun to resolve conflicts, we conducted surveys in three Baltimore neighborhoods – McElderry Park, Union Square, and Oliver. A first wave of surveys was conducted in November/December 2007 – after implementation had begun in McElderry Park but prior to a largely failed program implementation in Union Square. Oliver, which had unsuccessfully applied for *Safe Streets* funding, served as another nonintervention comparison neighborhood with baseline levels of gun violence similar to that of McElderry Park. For the second wave of surveys, conducted in Spring 2009, we excluded Union Square due to implementation problems which led to discontinuance of the program.

For each survey wave, young men ages 18 to 24 were recruited on the street and in public places to complete a brief, anonymous, self-administered survey. The survey contained hypothetical scenarios based on common sparks for shootings. One set of survey questions asked whether the respondent thought it was okay to either “threaten” or “shoot” the antagonist. Another set of questions asked respondents whether they thought their friends would think it was okay to threaten or shoot the antagonist in the same situations.

For survey Waves 1 and 2, youth in McElderry Park were much less likely than youth in the other neighborhoods to believe that it was okay to use a gun to resolve disputes in our scenarios. In fact, youth in McElderry Park were 4 times more likely to have the lowest level of support (“little or no”) for using violence than were youth in Union Square. Regression models showed that Wave 1 respondents in McElderry Park were less likely to support using guns to settle disputes ($p < .001$) after controlling for confounders. In the models for Wave 2, McElderry Park respondents were less likely to be in the “strong” support for gun violence category ($p < .001$), but there was no longer a significant neighborhood difference for being in the “moderate” support category.

Program Participants' Experiences and Views of Program Impact

In May 2011, we conducted anonymous interviews with program participants in Cherry Hill and McElderry Park to learn about their experiences with *Safe Streets*. Outreach staff provided information about the survey to each adult (age 18+) program participant and directed those who were interested to come to the program office at designated times when research interview staff would be available to conduct interviews. A total of 32 program participants in Cherry Hill and 33 in McElderry Park were interviewed.

As the *Safe Streets* program envisions, program participants are at high risk. Nearly half of program participants (48%) had ever been shot at.

Program outreach workers appear to be important parts of the lives of these young people. Two-thirds of participants saw their outreach worker 3 or more times per week; for

three-quarters of participants, these meetings lasted an average of more than 1 hour. Outreach workers provided program participants with various types of assistance. Participants who sought assistance reported that outreach workers helped with activities including: finding a job (88%); job interviewing skills (75%); job training (63%); getting into a school or GED program (95%); and resolving family conflicts (100%).

Outreach workers also helped the majority (52%) of program participants settle an average of two disputes. Twenty-eight percent of these disputes involved guns and 91% avoided violence. Overall, 80% of program participants reported that their lives were “better” since becoming program participant of *Safe Streets*.

Conclusions

Safe Streets was implemented in four of Baltimore’s most violent neighborhoods, engaging hundreds of high-risk youth, promoting nonviolence through community events, and mediating over 200 disputes with the potential to lead to a shooting. The program was associated with less acceptance for using guns to settle grievances in the one intervention neighborhood where attitudes were studied. Program participants reported benefiting from their connections to outreach workers in numerous ways that could be protective against future involvement in violence.

Three of the four program sites experienced large, statistically significant, program-related reductions in homicides or nonfatal shootings without having a counter-balancing significant increase in one of these outcome measures. Both program sites where *Safe Streets* was linked to large reductions in homicides mediated about three times as many disputes per month than did the other two program sites. Future efforts should focus on understanding and improving program implementation and discovering the conditions under which the program can be most effective in reducing violence.