



# NATIONAL NETWORK FOR SAFE COMMUNITIES

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence: Home/Street Visits

---

By Sibylle von Ulmenstein

February 2011

Direct communication and engagement with offenders and potential offenders is a central part of the group violence reduction strategy and usually is conducted in court houses or other formal settings in the community. At these meetings, known as “call-ins” or notifications, a partnership of law enforcement, community representatives and social service providers delivers a unified “no-violence” message to group and gang members (many of whom are mandated to attend as part of their probation or parole conditions), explains that violence will bring law enforcement attention to entire groups, offers services and alternatives to group members, and articulates community norms against violence. These group and gang members are then explicitly told to carry these messages back to their groups—with the explicit intent of influencing the behavior of all group and gang members in a given community.

Cincinnati, a member of the National Network’s Leadership Group, has been implementing the group violence reduction strategy since 2007 through an institutionalized partnership of law enforcement, street outreach workers, social services providers and researchers under the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) umbrella. CIRV has been at the forefront of designing new mechanisms to communicate directly with offenders. Home and street visits with key players of violent gangs or groups is one innovation CIRV has developed to sustain its no-violence message. Others include notifications in prisons or jails,<sup>1</sup> custom legal assessments, and voluntary “community conversations” involving law enforcement, the larger community and group members.

CIRV’s idea of communicating directly with key members of known street groups through home and street visits grew out of the realization that to sustain the deterrent effect of the non-violent

---

<sup>1</sup> National Network for Safe Communities (2010). [Innovative Notification Strategies: Lebanon Correctional Institution Call-In.](#)

message delivered at traditional group call-ins it was crucial to keep the lines of communications open. “We want to ensure that the messages remain as fresh in their minds as possible,” said Assistant Chief James Whalen.

To determine where and with whom home/street visits should be conducted, CIRV first assesses current violence levels within the city and identifies “hot-spot” areas with the greatest percentage of gun-related violence. Within those areas, the CIRV law enforcement team (drawing on knowledge provided by beat and special unit officers and probation and parole officials) identifies actively violent groups and, within those groups, known key players as candidates for home/street visits. Specifically, these individuals have to be 1) members of known violent groups/gangs in Cincinnati, and 2) “impact players” within their groups in terms of chronic patterns of crime and violence.<sup>2</sup>

Since first launching its home visits approach in September 2008, the CIRV team repeatedly ran into difficulties when attempting to locate the identified group impact players. In the first round of home visits, it was able to notify 26 of 32 selected individuals directly.<sup>3</sup> However, in subsequent rounds – conducted between June and October 2009 – the team was able to personally contact just 47 out of 287 selected individuals directly (16 percent success rate).<sup>4</sup> This low success rate was due largely to addresses given to probation or parole officers that were either invalid or not the individual’s primary residence or the individual was not home at the time of the visit, Whalen says. However, rather than abandon the home-visit approach altogether, the CIRV team decided instead to notify all known group members – not just those under parole or probation supervision – wherever it could find them, most frequently in the streets and sometimes in jails if they had recently been arrested for an unrelated offense. In 2010, CPD attempted to contact 539 identified group members and was successful in making personal contact with 137 of them, a 25 percent success rate.

CIRV initially sends representatives of its law enforcement agencies (police department, Hamilton County Probation, Ohio Adult Parole Authority, and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives) to deliver the anti-violence message to individual group members directly. While this puts a stronger emphasis on law enforcement than the traditional call-in notification, which includes

---

<sup>2</sup> Engel, R.S., Baker, G., Skubak Tillyer, M., Dunham, J.R., Hall, D., Ozer, M., Henson, B., Godsey, T. (2009). [Implementation of the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence \(CIRV\): Year 2 Report](#). University of Cincinnati Policing Institute

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

community members and social services representatives, it nevertheless does not involve an “arrest scenario,” Whalen stresses. Rather, the team takes into account the findings of research about legitimacy in law enforcement, which highlight the importance of respectful and fair treatment of suspects and offenders by officers as a means of encouraging greater compliance with the law.<sup>5</sup>

If the visit takes place in the street, officers usually call the individual to one side, but if other gang or group members are present and want to listen they are not excluded, Whalen says. The officers start the conversation by telling the group member/s what they know of current violent activity in the neighborhood as a way to demonstrate to them the up-to-date and current intelligence they have collected. “We have found that credibility is everything with this type of approach,” Whalen says. “If the information you have on them and/or others is out of date or inaccurate, you’ll lose their attention pretty quickly.”

The law enforcement team tells the targeted group member that he is expected to do his share in controlling the violence. It points out his legal vulnerabilities based on his criminal record and reiterates CIRV’s overall anti-violence message: that law enforcement is focusing on violent groups and he has been identified as a member of such a group; that social services are available if wanted; and that the community is demanding an end to the violence. Individuals who have been found to be eligible for federal prosecution for future gun and drug crimes are also provided with a copy of the Federal Sentencing Guidelines during the visit. Finally, the team issues a clear warning: “If more bodies fall, we’ll be coming back and that time it won’t be for a polite conversation,” Whalen sums up the message.

As this conversation takes place, a member of the CIRV team often casually flips through a folder that includes photos of the targeted individual and associates of his group. This visual prop has proven to be a very effective tool in focusing group members’ attention even if they are reluctant to listen. Seeing photos of themselves and their associates not only alerts them to the laser-like focus law enforcement is placing on them but also helps significantly with spreading CIRV’s anti-violence message within groups. “We come armed with this folder and we have found it has had a tremendous effect in getting the word out to others in the group,” Whalen says. “Everyone tells

---

<sup>5</sup> See Tyler, T. (2006) *Why People Obey the Law*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Meares, T. “The Legitimacy of Police Among Young African-American Men.” Barrock Lecture On Criminal Law, Marquette University Law School, February 19, 2009

everyone else whose photo they noticed was included in the folder, and those people will think much more carefully about their next steps,” he adds.

The law enforcement message delivered through the home/street visits is further reinforced by CIRV’s street outreach team, which maintains its own line of communications with the key players previously contacted by the law enforcement team. Outreach workers ensure that group members understand that the law enforcement warning must be taken seriously. At the same time, they reiterate that resources and services are available to those who want them. “We make sure they understand that the next group to be involved in a shooting self-selects for full law enforcement attention. But we add to this our message that while their community wants them to stop the violence they remain valued and loved, that there’s help for them if they want it, and that it’s time for them to take their rightful place in the community,” says Stan Ross, Director of CIRV’s street outreach team.

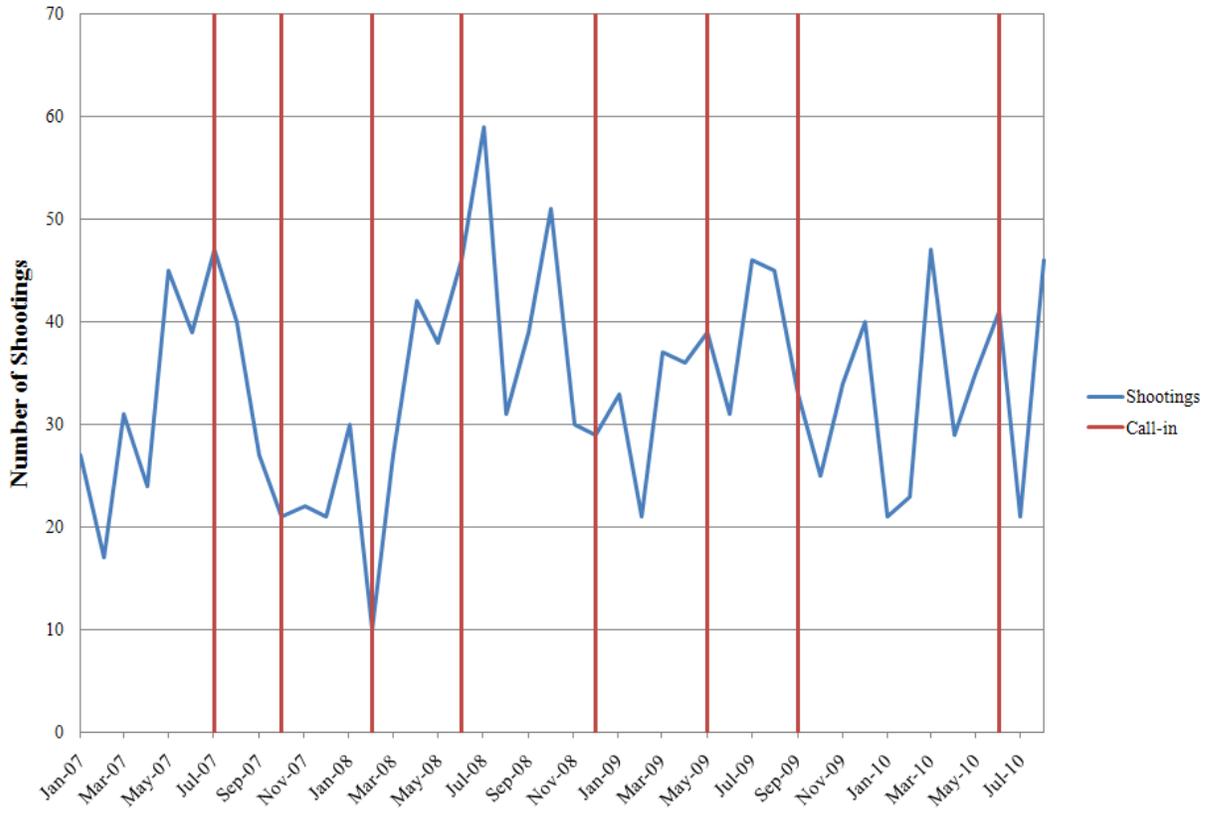
As reflected in the graphs below,<sup>6</sup> CIRV’s approach of direct communication with selected violent group members was found to have a substantial impact on shootings citywide. Each time there was an uptick in shootings — following the declines typically observed after an official group call-in — and CIRV’s law enforcement team visited key impact players at their homes or on the streets, the number of shootings again dropped immediately and often sharply. “We have been extremely pleased with the results we’ve been getting with this approach,” Whalen said.

The State of Ohio recently renewed its funding of this particular element of the CIRV initiative to cover the police department’s overtime expenditure. Overall, however, this form of notification remains much less time- and resource-intensive than a traditional call-in, Whalen says, and the CIRV team will maintain the approach as part of its overall group violence reduction strategy, confident that it will continue to produce results.

---

<sup>6</sup> Source: Engel, R.S. (2010). University of Cincinnati Policing Institute

**Cincinnati Shootings by Month: Jan 2007 – Aug 2010**



**Cincinnati Shootings by Month: Jan 2007 – Aug 2010**

