



NBP



Prosecuting and Preventing Gun Violence: An Overview for Prosecutors

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THE NATIONAL BEST PRACTICES COMMITTEE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The National Best Practices Committee (NBP), convened by Prosecutors' Center for Excellence (PCE), brings prosecutors together to share ideas, discuss challenges, and develop guidance on today's prosecution best practices.

The NBP includes experienced prosecutors from large and small offices in 30 states. The committee meets on a regular basis to collaborate on creating a vision for the prosecutor's office of the future and issuing papers related to that topic. The mission of the NBP is to improve the criminal justice system by providing support, guidance, and considerations for prosecutors. The NBP addresses the challenging issues impacting victims, witnesses, the accused, and the community. The guiding principles for NBP's work are a commitment to justice, integrity, ethics, fairness, and equity for all.

See NBP's work and NBP's members at the [National Best Practices Committee webpage](#).

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PROSECUTING AND PREVENTING GUN VIOLENCE: An Overview for Prosecutors

This paper continues a series of papers issued by the National Best Practices Committee on topics of current interest for prosecutors.

INTRODUCTION

Gun violence persists as a significant public safety threat in communities throughout the United States. While gun-related deaths and injuries have declined since the recent peak reached in 2021-22, overall numbers remain higher than pre-pandemic levels – and include a continuing increase in gun suicides. Firearms have become the leading cause of death for children ages 17 and younger, underscoring the harm caused by youth gun violence.¹

Prosecutors are well positioned to address this tragic problem by improving their jurisdiction’s response to gun violence. Prosecutor offices are often seen as the essential link to obtaining convictions or other outcomes for gun arrests. However, they also are the lead law enforcement official in the county, especially in jurisdictions with multiple police departments. They have clout in the community that allows them to encourage local agencies and community groups to join in a coordinated effort against gun violence. Finally, prosecutors are effective at advocating for needed funding from local, state, and federal sources.

Through research, innovation, collaboration, and outreach, prosecutor offices are developing many effective methods for investigating and litigating these violent crimes, as well as preventing future incidents. This paper provides an overview of some of the successful approaches being used by prosecutors around the country.

¹ Kim, R., Wagner, E.D., Nestadt, P.S., Somayaji, N., Howitz, J., Crifasi, C.K., *Gun Violence in the United States 2023*, Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, Johns Hopkins Center for Suicide Prevention, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (June 2025), citing relevant data from the Centers for Disease Control, <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/2025-06/2023-cgvs-gun-violence-in-the-united-states.pdf>. See also, the Gun Violence Archive, <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org>.

PATTERNS OF GUN VIOLENCE

Understanding the circumstances that lead to gun violence is crucial to reducing the occurrence of these crimes. As described by Ben Struhl, Executive Director of the Crime and Justice Policy Lab at the University of Pennsylvania, violence often follows recognizable patterns. When a pattern is identified, the associated violent activity can be addressed – and, ideally, prevented – using targeted law enforcement action and social services. <https://pceinc.org/what-works-in-preventing-and-prosecuting-gun-violence/>

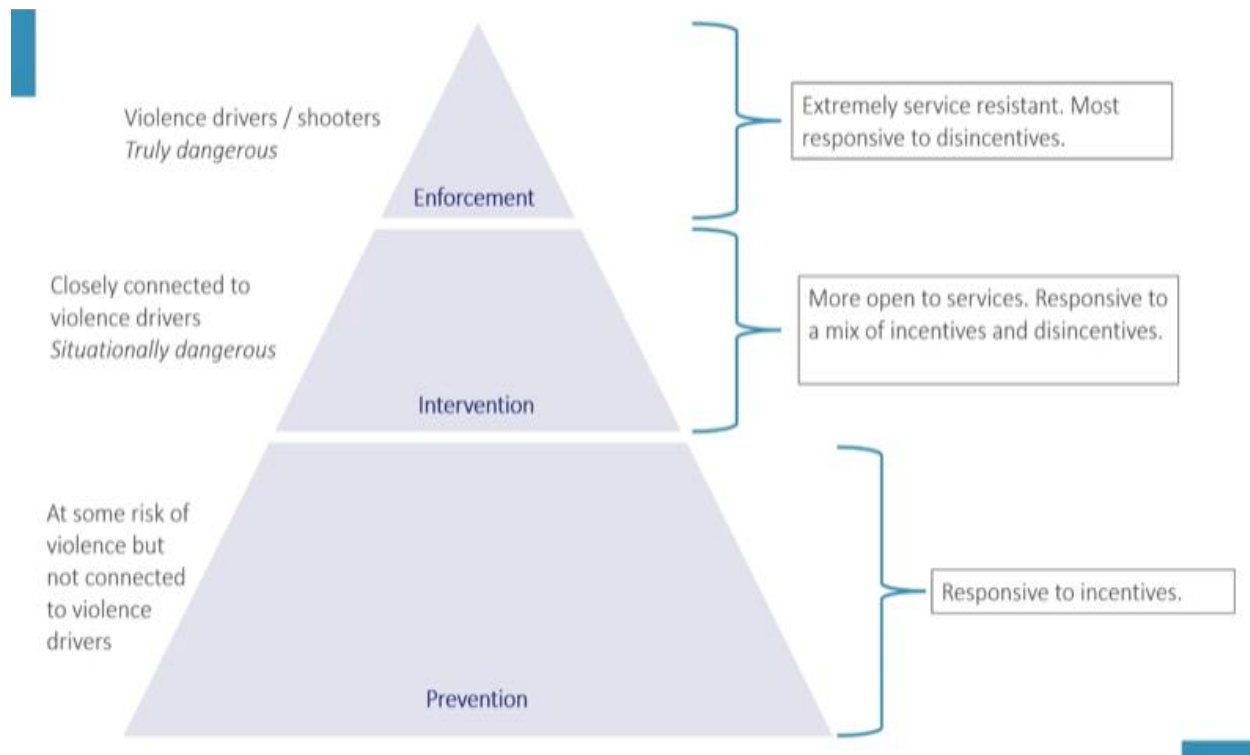
Certain gun violence patterns are pervasive across regions and jurisdictions. For example, escalating episodes of domestic violence often form an identifiable violence pattern that may ultimately result in a shooting. Similarly, incidents of mental disorders, addiction, or bullying that lead to firearm suicides are common violence patterns found in virtually every community.

Some gun violence patterns are more likely to occur in urban areas. In 2023, over half of the country's reported gun homicides occurred in just 42 cities, including Chicago, Philadelphia, Memphis, Houston, and others.² Struhl and the Crime and Justice Policy Lab have shown that in cities, most gun violence occurs in concentrated “hot spots”, and is motivated by disputes between members of different groups. These groups may be formal gangs or informal networks – for example, individuals living in the same neighborhood or in the same apartment building. If one member of a group is shot over a dispute, other members retaliate, creating an ongoing cycle of gun violence.

Analysis of dispute-motivated shooting incidents in numerous cities has shown that the individuals involved generally fall into three categories that can be viewed as a pyramid:

- **Violence drivers:** A small number of people at the top of the pyramid who proactively shoot people over disputes with other groups and engage in retaliatory shootings.
- **Those closely connected to violence drivers:** A larger set of individuals in the middle of the pyramid who are more situationally violent, such as in reaction to a shooting.
- **Those at some risk of violence but not connected to violence drivers:** An even larger set of individuals at the bottom of the pyramid who might become interested in engaging in violent acts, but who are not yet personally involved or close to ongoing violence. Some of these individuals can be described as “wouldbes” or “wannabes”.

² See: https://everytownresearch.org/stat/portion-of-gun-homicides-occurred-in-cities/?_gl=1*rknxfm*_ga*Nzk1NTkwNDMuMTc1ODcxNzM3MA..*_ga_1FTV9KT752*_czE3NTg4MDc0MjUkbzlkZzAkDDE3NTg4MDc0MjUkajYwJGwwJGgw*_ga_68QYBV181T*_czE3NTg4MDc0MjUkbzlkZzAkDDE3NTg4MDc0MjUkajYwJGwwJGgw (last viewed 9/25/25).



The Crime and Policy Lab’s work has shown that different approaches are needed to make headway with each category.³ Violence drivers – the most dangerous group – do not respond well to intervention or social services. For this category, rigorous deterrence efforts by law enforcement and prosecutors are generally needed to stop their violent activity. On the other hand, those closely connected to violence drivers are better reached through genuine intervention outreach and service offers, as well as the disincentive of law enforcement attention. The third category of individuals at some risk of violence tends to respond positively to a variety of violence prevention programs.

Stemming group-motivated gun violence requires a city to focus attention and appropriate resources primarily on the violence drivers and those closely connected to them. When change is made among these categories of actors, prevention programs become more useful in stopping those at lower risk of violence from entering the cycle.

³ The illustration above is from Ben Struhl’s presentation to the National Best Practices Committee on July 17, 2025. He discusses the illustration in his video, the link to which is included in this paper.

PROSECUTOR INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS GUN VIOLENCE

Prosecutor offices in several states have launched new and specialized efforts to reduce gun violence by addressing the underlying patterns of violent activity. These programs include:

Nonfatal Shooting Initiatives

Several jurisdictions have reduced gun violence by focusing on nonfatal shooting incidents. Traditionally, only shootings resulting in a homicide have been exhaustively investigated by law enforcement agencies. As described above, however, most urban shootings – whether they result in a homicide – involve the same identifiable violence drivers, those closely connected to them, and those at risk of becoming more engaged in violent conduct. Some cities, such as Denver, Colorado and St. Paul, Minnesota, have begun treating homicides and nonfatal shootings with equal focus. This approach recognizes that the pattern of actors, motivations, and likely retaliation are the same; the only difference is the extent of the physical injury.

To investigate all shootings like a homicide case, these initiatives use collaborative approaches that combine increased law enforcement resources with designated prosecutors who are familiar with local violence patterns. In St. Paul, for example, the Ramsey County District Attorney's Office and the St. Paul Police Department have worked together to establish a Nonfatal Shooting Unit. The unit consists of carefully selected police officers with strong investigative experience. The officers work with dedicated prosecutors assigned to provide legal assistance to nonfatal shooting investigations and review all resulting charges. The officers are given the time and support to undertake comprehensive investigations that thoroughly collect and analyze relevant evidence, in tandem with the team of prosecutors who are highly knowledgeable of both the city's gun violence landscape and effective methods of charging and litigating shooting cases. As part of the office's Gun Violence Initiative, unit officers and prosecutors also meet bi-weekly with community and criminal justice partners to analyze recent shootings and evolving trends. This approach has significantly reduced both homicides and non-fatal shootings.

<https://pceinc.org/focusing-on-non-fatal-shootings-in-st-paul-mn/>⁴

Crime Strategies Initiatives

Some prosecutor offices are using multi-pronged crime strategies to reduce gun violence in their communities, including Crime Strategies Units. A Crime Strategies Unit is a unit within a prosecutor office that collects data and intelligence on crime trends and individuals driving crime, analyzes the information, forms partnerships with related agencies and gathers input from the

⁴ See also, St. Paul: <https://www.startribune.com/violent-crime-is-down-in-st-paul-heres-whats-working/601345555>.

community on public safety issues.⁵ At the Santa Clara (California) District Attorney's Office, for example, the Crime Strategies Unit oversees several programs aimed at limiting shootings and illegal firearms sales. These strategies include:

- **Dedicated Prosecution Unit:** The prosecutors work in collaboration with law enforcement partners on firearms investigations, prosecuting any resulting charges.
- **Gun Violence Task Force:** The Task Force is led by the District Attorney's Office that investigates the illegal sale, manufacturing, and trafficking of firearms.
- **Gun Related Intelligence Program (GRIP):** The GRIP program serves as a clearinghouse for collecting and sharing crime gun intelligence, in partnership with numerous criminal justice agencies.
- **Priority Gun Offender Program (PROP):** The PROP program identifies violent crime drivers and develops methods for addressing their violent conduct and/or unlawful firearms possession.
- **Gun Violence Restraining Orders:** The Crime Strategies Unit uses training and advocacy to obtain court orders that require a person who is shown to pose a danger to himself or others to relinquish their firearms.
- **Firearm Relinquishment Program (FRP):** The FRP program ensures individuals who have been ordered by a court to relinquish their firearms, such as individuals issued protective orders, actually do so.

Prosecutors in the Crime Strategies Unit handle firearms cases vertically, from charging through trial. Their caseload includes offenders who use firearms in violent crimes, as well as those who sell or build illegal firearms. Unit prosecutors also focus on individuals found with firearms, who have prior convictions or court orders that prohibit firearm possession. See video of Deputy Assistant District Attorney Michael Vidmar, Chief of the Crime Strategies Unit, describing the Santa Clara Crime Strategy Unit: <https://pceinc.org/crime-strategy-units-making-the-case-to-law-enforcement/>

Hot Spot Initiatives

Prosecutor offices are also reducing gun violence by focusing on geographical concentrations of violent incidents. The Bronx County (New York) District Attorney's Office, for example, uses its Crime Strategies Unit and crime analysts to gather, track, and visualize data about violent crimes occurring within its jurisdictional boundaries. From a combination of law enforcement data, follow-up investigation, and open-source information, the analysts create maps and timelines of shooting incidents. Using this analysis, they can then identify geographical clusters of violence, or "hot spots". One such hot spot in the Bronx is only one-quarter of a square mile in size, but

⁵ See, The Problem-Solving Prosecutor: Modern Variations on the Crime Strategies Unit (2021), <https://pceinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20210110-The-Problem-Solving-Prosecutor-Modern-Variations-on-teh.-Crime-Strategies-Unit-PCE-DANY-Bronx-DA-Aequitas-.pdf>.

experiences a disproportionately large number of homicides, nonfatal shootings, robberies, illegal firearm possessions, felony assaults, and narcotics sales.

With a hot spot determined, the crime analysts then work to develop information about priority offenders who are driving the violent crime. This information is shared with law enforcement partners to determine how to address gun violence actors and incidents. Analysts also may collaborate with community-based organizations for intervention with situationally dangerous or at-risk individuals. Along with the crime analysts' work, the office's Community Outreach Bureau connects with community organizations within the hot spot area to create better outreach mechanisms to local youth, as well as more robust reentry services for offenders returning from prison. The DA's Office also works to connect with community leaders through stakeholder meetings about violence in the hotspot.⁶

Other Prosecutor-Related Initiatives

Many prosecutor offices are using a combination of programs to reduce gun violence, such as:

Crime Gun Intelligence Centers: This collaborative program funded by the Department of Justice focuses on linking recovered firearms to shootings and other violent crimes through the National Integrated Ballistics Information Network (NIBIN) forensic evidence program. Police, ATF, local prosecutors, and federal prosecutors work together to identify, investigate, and prosecute the most dangerous trigger pullers using the NIBIN leads. (Example: Cuyahoga County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, Cleveland, Ohio)

Regular Collaborative Shooting Reviews: Prosecutor offices are establishing recurring meetings with law enforcement, prosecutors, and other criminal justice partners to evaluate recent gun violence incidents and consider investigative and preventive steps. Some offices also hold similar meetings with community partners. (Example: Wilmington Attorney General's Office, Delaware)

Specialized Group-Driven Violence Units: These collaborative units combine dedicated law enforcement and prosecutor resources to investigate and prosecute incidents related to violent conduct driven by gang or group disputes. (Example: Delaware County District Attorney's Office, Chester, Pennsylvania)⁷

Improved Intelligence Systems: Some offices are improving existing data systems to capture and prioritize information that gives law enforcement agencies and prosecutor

⁶ Based on interviews with crime analysts and violent crime prosecutors in the Bronx District Attorney's Office.

⁷ See: Prosecutor Initiatives to Reduce Gun Violence, CJPL and PCE (2024) at <https://pceinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/20241017-Prosecutor-Initiatives-to-Reduce-Gun-Violence-CJPL-and-PCE.pdf> (last viewed 9/24/25) and the Department of Justice's National Crime Gun Intelligence Center grant program. See, <https://crimegunintelcenters.org/> (last viewed 9/24/25).

offices a better understanding of who is engaged in violent conduct within their communities, and at what level. (Example: King County Attorney's Office, Seattle, Washington)

Identifying Violent Offenders at Intake: Many offices are working with law enforcement partners to identify violence drivers and their associates any time they may enter the criminal justice system, regardless of charge. Some prosecutor offices are creating changes in their intake processes, such as arrest alert systems, to better recognize individuals at the heart of local violence patterns and make appropriate investigative and charging decisions accordingly. (Example: Santa Clara County District Attorney's Office, San Jose, California).

Comprehensive Documentation of Shooting Incidents: Prosecutor offices are taking steps to become better informed of all gun violence activity within their jurisdiction, regardless of whether there is an arrest. Some prosecutors are reviewing all shooting incidents, irrespective of whether an injury has occurred, for overlapping offenders, victims, and firearms. (Example: Bronx District Attorney's Office, New York)

Supporting Outreach Programs: Because of gaps in available service and intervention programs for individuals connected to violence drivers (or otherwise at risk of engaging in violence), prosecutor offices are working to increase funding and public-private partnerships for community groups who provide these services. (Example: Lake County State's Attorney's Office, Illinois)

Coordinating Existing Services: Prosecutor offices also are working to improve the effectiveness of existing violence intervention and prevention programs by promoting the appropriate layering of needed outreach activities and the measurement of each service's impact. (Example: Brooklyn District Attorney's Office, New York)

Notably, some of these strategies do not require additional funding. Prosecutor offices often are implementing these initiatives using existing personnel and budget allocations.

STRENGTHENING GUN VIOLENCE INVESTIGATION AND PROSECUTION

Prosecutor offices are employing a variety of techniques to improve gun violence investigation and prosecution, including in cases where victims and witnesses are unwilling to cooperate.

Digital Evidence

Investigators and prosecutors are successfully prosecuting gun violence offenders by focusing on digital evidence, including from the time periods surrounding a firearms incident. Sources of evidence from before, during, and after a gun violence event can include⁸:

- **Surveillance videos:** Video cameras are ubiquitous in almost every jurisdiction and can be found in a variety of public locations, as well as at businesses and private homes.
- **Cell Towers:** Cell tower data and geo location warrants can establish the time a phone was at a particular location and how it moved through the area.
- **License-Plate Readers:** The movement and location of a vehicle can be determined through license plate reader data, which is collected by both the police and private entities.
- **Vehicle Information:** Details about vehicles used by suspects and victims – or that are driving in the area of a shooting – can provide valuable information, from driving records to the car’s Event Data Recorder.
- **Social Media Posts:** Gun violence is often the topic of social media posts, which can include photos of the crime and/or the firearms involved and can reveal the identity of suspects, victims, and their associates.
- **Jail Calls:** The calls from persons in jail or prison to associates of suspects, victims, or witnesses provide valuable intelligence.
- **Cell Phone Downloads:** Cell phones recovered from shooting scenes, or from suspects and victims, have vast amounts of information including texts, photos, location information, search histories, and contact information for associates.
- **Other Data Gathering Systems:** A growing number of devices collect and save data, such as watches, fitness trackers, video gaming consoles, and smart speakers.

Together, these types of evidence are helping to uncover and prove the identity of offenders, as well as to demonstrate the group-related motives for shootings. This evidence is particularly important in cases with uncooperative witnesses.

Forensic Evidence

Prosecutors are using ballistics evidence from shootings, shots-fired, and firearms possession incidents to build intelligence and evidence about violence patterns. Some offices are using the NIBIN database to seek information about all or most recovered firearms, spent bullets, bullet fragments, and discarded firearms. In addition, DNA and fingerprints are often recovered from the gun and sometimes even from the shell casings.

⁸ For more details about these types of evidence, see PCE’s Resource Library on evidence at <https://pceinc.org/evidence/>.

Crime Analysts

Prosecutor offices are increasingly using crime analysts to better understand crime patterns, enhance intelligence gathering, assist law enforcement agencies with investigations, and create compelling exhibits for use in Grand Juries or trials. These non-lawyer analysts work with the growing amount of complex digital evidence, data, and open-source information to help investigators and prosecutors acquire and utilize compelling evidence about gun violence incidents.⁹ See videos on various aspects of a crime analyst's work: <https://pceinc.org/pce-videos-the-prosecutors-crime-analyst-an-essential-employee/>

Witness Cooperation

Lack of witness cooperation and witness intimidation is a recurring problem for proving gun violence cases. Some successful prosecutor programs to encourage better cooperation have included:

- **Male Advocates:** Hiring male victim advocates of color, who can relate to the male victims of gun violence can be helpful in gaining the trust of the victims. (Example: New York County District Attorney's Office, New York).
- **Coordination with Police Advocates:** Increasingly police departments are victim advocates. Prosecutor advocates have worked to coordinate with the police advocates to collaborate on services provided for shooting victims and witnesses. (Example: St. Louis Circuit Attorney's Office, Missouri).
- **Trauma Informed Interviewing:** Increasingly, prosecutors have embraced trauma informed interviewing of witnesses, which includes showing empathy and respect to witnesses and victims.¹⁰ This can enhance victim and witness cooperation.

Collaborative Intelligence Gathering

Many prosecutor offices are pursuing collaborative programs with law enforcement and other criminal justice agencies to better share and respond to intelligence about gun violence actors and patterns. These approaches include regular intelligence-sharing meetings, shooting incident reviews, dedicated personnel to serve as informed points of contact, and data-sharing

⁹ See The Prosecutor's Crime Analyst: An Essential Employee, PCE (2022) at <https://pceinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/20221013-The-Prosecutors-Crime-Analyst-An-Essential-Employee-PCE.pdf>.

¹⁰ See The Empathetic Prosecutor: Reducing Bias When Working with Victims, Survivors, and Witnesses, PCE (2022) at <https://pceinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/20220803-The-Empathetic-Prosecutor-Reducing-Bias-When-Working-with-Victims-Survivors-and-Witnesses.pdf>.

mechanisms. Examples of this are the Crime Gun Intelligence Centers that exist around the country in high-crime cities. See: <https://crimegunintelcenters.org/>.

Science-Based Interviewing

Prosecutor offices and law enforcement agencies around the country are starting to implement science-based interviewing techniques to obtain detailed, credible statements about gun violence incidents from offenders, witnesses, and victims. The strength of this statement evidence improves criminal prosecutions and provides reliable intelligence about ongoing community gun violence patterns. See, Assistant District Attorney Linda Ford from the New York County District Attorney's Office at <https://pceinc.org/science-based-interviewing/>

Investigative Grand Juries

Some prosecutor offices are using the Grand Jury process to further gun violence investigations and to secure evidence of violent crime. In some jurisdictions, subpoenaing evidence and requiring witnesses to provide statements under oath through a Grand Jury are helpful strategies for obtaining cooperation and information.

INVESTING IN COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AND OUTREACH

Partnerships between prosecutor offices, community organizations, and survivors have proven to be important and effective approaches for reducing gun violence.

Survivor-Led Community Groups

Survivor-led groups exist in many areas affected by gun violence. These programs typically are led by victims and victim family-members, who work to prevent future violence, assist new victims and their families, and raise awareness about gun violence in the community. While their work is too often unknown to prosecutor offices and law enforcement agencies, partnerships with such organizations can greatly increase the likelihood that survivors will engage in the criminal justice process and, therefore, that cases will be resolved.

Gun violence survivors and their families often feel stigmatized. In urban environments, they may be perceived as criminal participants themselves. In rural locations, they may be seen as having failed to take personal responsibility for the violent events that occurred. As a result, victims and families of deceased victims can mistrust the criminal justice system. Survivor-led community organizations work to bridge that divide, providing guidance and resources based on their own experience. Partnerships with such groups give prosecutors the opportunity to understand survivor concerns and regain that trust, which in turn leads to increased cooperation from victims and witnesses, and the better provision of victim services. See, Founder of Mothers Against Gun Violence Debra Gillispie and RTI Social Science Researcher Stacy Sechrist's video on

Survivor Led Community Groups, <https://pceinc.org/working-with-the-community-to-reduce-violence/>

Proactive Community Engagement

In addition, proactive education and engagement about reducing gun violence also builds stronger connections between prosecutor offices and the communities most affected by these crimes. In Salt Lake County (Utah), for example, the District Attorney's Office uses several ways to communicate policies about gun violence prosecution and elicit feedback and information from community members about gun violence patterns and cases, including:

- **Community Council meetings:** The District Attorney and staff members appear at Community Council sessions around Salt Lake County to hear about gun violence concerns and answer questions regarding charging policies and prosecutions.
- **Justice Academy:** The office holds regular open forums with community members that frequently include discussions of gun violence issues, including gang activity.
- **Criminal justice stakeholder meetings:** The office also has regular meetings with criminal justice agencies regarding gun violence trends and cases and community feedback.
- **Citizen meetings:** Community members can set up one-on-one meetings with the District Attorney. The focus of these meetings often is gun violence in local communities or specific gun violence prosecutions.

The Salt Lake District Attorney's Office has found these platforms to be tremendously valuable. They enable the office to inform and educate about gun violence issues, while allowing residents to have a voice in the criminal justice response. See Chief Assistant District Attorney Anna Rossi Anderson, Salt Lake County District Attorney's Office at <https://pceinc.org/citizen-meetings-with-the-district-attorney/>

GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION EFFORTS

Along with investigating and prosecuting gun violence incidents, many prosecutor offices are working to prevent gun violence from occurring or escalating. Some of the efforts being utilized are:

Prosecutors Against Gun Violence (PAGV)

This national prosecutor organization has focused on studying the causes of gun violence and strategies for prevention. See, <https://prosecutorsagv.org/>.

Rapid Intervention

In collaboration with law enforcement partners and, at times, community-based organizations, prosecutor offices are working on developing intelligence about violence drivers and those

closely associated with them. When this process produces information about potential retaliatory shootings or other imminent gun violence, prosecutors are helping to facilitate intervention actions to prevent more violence from occurring.

Gun Safety

Prosecutor offices around the country are using various approaches to promote gun safety in their jurisdictions, including educational outreach about gun theft and suicide prevention. Some offices also host events, often in partnership with other local organizations, to provide free gun safety supplies to community members, such as gun locks and gun safes.

Role of Social Media

Gun violence is often fueled by social media posts, especially with situations involving group disputes. In addition, firearms are easily illegally sold or exchanged via social media – including among youth. Building community education and awareness about the role of social media in gun violence, including the availability of parental supervision tools, is another way prosecutor offices can work to prevent gun violence.

Firearm Relinquishment through Court Orders

As discussed earlier, some prosecutor offices are supporting law enforcement efforts to seek court orders that require individuals to relinquish their firearms when they are determined to be a threat to themselves or others. These orders work to prevent people experiencing a mental health or other crisis from engaging in gun violence.

Community Events and Collaborations

Prosecutors around the country also are offering stakeholder meetings, youth summits, and other events to educate and engage community members regarding efforts to stem gun violence.

CONCLUSION

Frequent gun violence continues to haunt communities around the nation, with the number of youth victims and gun suicides continuing to grow. In response, prosecutors are deploying numerous approaches to address gun violence incidents and prevent future violent events. These initiatives include new prosecution programs and investigative strategies that use data, intelligence, and collaboration to understand and respond to violence patterns. Community input and participation are vital to these efforts, including coordination with survivor-led organizations that can improve victim and witness participation in the criminal justice process. Using the methods described in this paper, along with evolving research and innovations, prosecutors are demonstrating that reducing gun violence is an achievable goal.