

**Comprehensive
Approaches to Reducing
Youth Violence and Gangs
in Local Communities**

*Innovative Practices from the
Shannon Community Safety
Initiative Series*

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Introduction

The presence of gang members in a community contributes to higher levels of violence and increases fear of crime in cities across the county.ⁱ While gangs have traditionally been associated with major urban areas, the most recent survey data from American law enforcement agencies documents that gangs exist in a wide range of communities. Gangs are present in the majority of cities with a population greater than 50,000 and in over 90 percent of cities with a population over 100,000.ⁱⁱ The presence of gangs is not restricted to large or medium sized cities, however, with 32 percent of small cities (populations between 2,500 and 49,999) reporting the presence of gangs in their community. These data also document that the number of gangs and gang members, nationally, have increased dramatically between 1990 and the present.

Cities in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts are not immune to such national trends. While gang violence was widely recognized in Boston and other large cities in the Commonwealth in the 1990s, gang presence has since migrated into smaller cities and suburbs across the state. Despite years of innovative programming to reduce youth violence and deter gang membership, communities throughout the Commonwealth continue to struggle with problems associated with gang related activity. In fact, according to the Massachusetts Your Risk Behavior Survey for 2005, 10 percent of all high school students in the Commonwealth reported that they were members of a gang.ⁱⁱⁱ The opportunity to address gang problems through a comprehensive approach offers the potential for communities in the Commonwealth to significantly reduce youth violence enhance safety.

The primary goal of the Charles E. Shannon, Jr. Community Safety Initiative (hereinafter referred to as Shannon CSI) is to reduce gang and youth violence in Massachusetts through coordinated programs for prevention, intervention, and suppression. Recognizing that every community has somewhat different types of youth violence and gang problems and various levels of existing capacity to address these problems, the Shannon CSI program provided \$11 million to support communities in developing comprehensive responses that targeted the local problem and incorporated local resources. The focus on locally tailored solutions to gang problems is a primary strength of the Shannon CSI program.

To support this effort in 2006 the Massachusetts Executive Office

of Public Safety and Security (EOPSS) provided funds through the Edward J. Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (Byrne JAG) program to eight Local Action Research Partners and to a Statewide Youth Violence Research Partner to provide strategic, analytic, and research support to ten Shannon CSI collaboratives. A primary role of the Statewide Research Partner is to gather and share lessons learned from the Shannon CSI grantees and Local Action Research Partners and to document and assess the results of the project (please refer to Appendix A for a complete list of funded communities and research partners). As one in a series of *Innovative Practices from the Shannon Community Safety Initiative*, this guide describes the main components of comprehensive and coordinated approaches to youth violence and gangs and highlights examples of these approaches from Shannon CSI collaboratives in Massachusetts.

The Comprehensive Approach

Police agencies and social service providers have a number of traditional responses that they have relied upon to counter youth violence and gangs in their local community. Building on these local strengths, the Shannon CSI encouraged communities to adopt the national best practices model of combining strategies which have proven to be successful in reducing youth violence and gangs nationally in a comprehensive local program.

In the early 1990s researchers developed a typology of promising gang intervention strategies that address the fundamental causes of gangs, gang crimes, and the other problems that gangs cause.^{iv} These strategies were later adopted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) as best practices to reduce gang violence).^v Five strategies identified were: (1) suppression, (2) social intervention, (3) social opportunities, (4) community mobilization, and (5) organizational change. Suppression includes law enforcement and criminal justice interventions such as arrest, prosecution, imprisonment and surveillance. It has been the predominant strategy in responding to gangs in most communities. The remaining strategies in the OJJDP comprehensive approach have been adopted somewhat less often in communities. These include social intervention strategies such as crisis intervention, treatment for youths and their families and social service referrals. Social opportunities approaches stress education and job related services as well as developing healthy youth activities. Community mobilization focuses on cooperation

across agencies to produce better coordination of existing services. Finally, organizational change strategies typically include the development of task forces to address gang problems. Each community funded under Shannon CSI was encouraged to incorporate programming across the five strategy areas when developing their proposed approach.

Main Features of a Comprehensive Response

A comprehensive strategy requires programs to address each of the five OJJDP strategies operating in coordination within a community. The strategies should compliment one other, addressing different stages of the gang problem that often are present simultaneously within communities. In most communities, the largest numbers of individuals are in need of prevention services, a smaller number need targeted intervention, and the smallest segment of the population will need suppression efforts.^{vi}

Nationally, many communities start out with a goal of implementing a comprehensive strategy but frequently end up with a much more limited program when it is actually implemented. There are multiple reasons for this pattern including:

- Insufficient resources allocated to partner agencies
- A lack of agreement as to the distribution of resources across partner agencies
- Focus on suppression efforts believing they will provide an immediate reduction in gang violence.
- Lack of centralized leadership and coordination across partner agencies.
- Even in communities where local agencies have developed innovative programs, law enforcement, non-governmental organizations and social services often struggle to work together.

For a comprehensive approach to be truly effective its various components must be coordinated. The existing literature on comprehensive strategies has identified a number of successful steps that have been used to help cultivate comprehensive approaches.^{vii} These include leadership, coordinated action steps, and information sharing which are described below.

Leadership

Identifying a key stakeholder or “champion” who can oversee the

main goals of the project and coordinate among project partners is critical to reduce the “program drift” that often naturally occurs in comprehensive programs where partners are naturally pulled in different directions. For example, in St Louis in the 1990s the U.S. Attorney’s Office assumed a leadership role in convening all the partner organization on a regular basis to reaffirm the comprehensive mission. Through these meetings the project leaders continually promoted each of the components of the comprehensive model as being necessary if they were to impact the local gang violence problem. The program leaders help keep the group together and focused on the problem at hand, and can often call for accountability on the part of agency partners.

Coordinated Action Steps

The development of “action plans” that outline the activity in each of the comprehensive areas has proven to be an effective way to organize such large and often complicated projects. In Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) the 10 Comprehensive Anti-Gang Initiative Sites have been brought together twice by the United States Department of Justice to develop action plans for their coordinated approach to reducing gang and gun violence. These plans outline the action steps to be taken in the next three to six months and the person responsible for ensuring that the task is completed.

In local communities similar planning and coordination has occurred through regular meetings, in which action steps are identified and individuals from the group are assigned each task. Each individual then assumes ownership for moving the response ahead and is required to report out on progress at the next meeting. The National Youth Gang Center activity monitoring log is a useful tool for developing and tracking action steps (a copy of the tool is included in Appendix B). In other jurisdictions, it has proven useful to provide a “report card” for effectiveness of the responses which can inform decisions about whether or not to follow, alter or abandon a particular course of action.

Information Sharing

In addition to sharing information about project progress through regular meetings, comprehensive approaches often develop systems to share intelligence and information about participants among program partners. In Orange County, California, regular gang intervention project meetings were supplemented by a Gang Incident

Tracking System (GITS), which collected and made available to law enforcement personnel a broad array of information on individual gang members. This information system allowed a number of local law enforcement agencies to share information on active gang members and their current legal status and probationary restrictions.

Examples of Comprehensive Approaches from Shannon CSI

Programs funded through the Shannon CSI were strongly encouraged to develop activity in each of the five OJJDP designated strategies and were encouraged to integrate these components into a comprehensive strategy. A review of the community progress reports after one year of funding indicates that most communities have successfully adopted elements from each of the strategy areas. While an impressive number of Shannon communities have developed programs that include features necessary to sustain a comprehensive model, we have selected a limited number of examples from Shannon CSI communities to highlight activities that have specifically improved information sharing and coordinated action steps.

Information Sharing

Information sharing is crucial to the comprehensive approach. The collaborative programs in Brockton and Lowell have both developed information sharing systems that advance the comprehensive approach in their collaborative during the first year of funding.

As a result of the varied strategies employed in Brockton, different partners encounter youth in need of services and intervention. To coordinate information on an individual youth coming from different program partners the collaborative developed a standardized youth referral system through one of its partner agencies for intake and

The Brockton Strategy:

The Brockton collaborative includes a broad array of suppression activities which have been incorporated with other elements of the comprehensive model. The collaborative has integrated suppression strategies with youth outreach and mentoring and a drug treatment program, both examples of social intervention. Four separate opportunity provision activities are also present in Brockton: job readiness training, job placement programs, GED training and recreational activities. There is also widespread community involvement in Brockton's CSI efforts, with an active Community Advisory Board soliciting input from the community through a series of community-wide meetings.

assessment, MY TURN. Here agency officials compile information from multiple program partners with client interviews and use that information to make referrals to the most appropriate agencies. Additionally, in order to subsequently monitor the youth receiving services from the program, project partners in Brockton have implemented a standardized reporting form for each their programs. The system created during the first year of the Shannon CSI provides each project partner with information for each child receiving services through the collaborative such as *referral source, services received, name of case manager, and date referred to program*. This data is collected monthly and submitted to the program coordinator at the Brockton Police Department and then city-wide data is made available to individual project partners through regular reports.

What is most impressive about the Brockton initiative is that it is comprehensive and integrated across strategies. While many communities have adopted different strategies, targeting gang problems from a variety of angles, the activities in each of the strategies are not always integrated with each other. In such cases the overall model tends to be less successful.

The program in Lowell has achieved similar success in developing and implementing a comprehensive gang response strategy.

The Lowell Strategy:

At the outset of the Shannon CSI, the Mayor's Office and the Lowell Police Department hosted three gang summits, which were open to public officials, social services agencies, the faith-based community and the public. These summits were the first stage of creating a collaborative and effective strategy to target gangs in the City of Lowell. The community then used the information gathered from these summits to create a strategic plan for gang prevention, education, and suppression. The plan highlighted 16 major recommendations, many of which were then utilized to develop the city's Shannon CSI interventions. Lowell's set of interventions focus on three specific areas, prevention of retaliatory violence through outreach, truancy reduction, and additional programming for at risk youth. Lowell has identified and implemented suppression activities that include hot spot patrol, collaboration with prosecution and probation, increased code enforcement, the use of "key player" lists, and regular meetings to share gang intelligence. These suppression activities are integrated with opportunities provision activities that include tutoring, job readiness training and GED training. Finally these activities have been complemented with social intervention activities focused on schools, including a mentoring program, anti-gang curriculum for schools, and after school programs.

To support their comprehensive approach the City of Lowell developed a strong data collection system and regularly holds information sharing meetings. The collaborative in Lowell shares law enforcement information through its *Safety First* team. This group meets regularly and is comprised of the city's law enforcement partners. During these meetings, the group utilizes crime mapping to coordinate the deployment of patrol officers. In addition, the Lowell collaborative also utilizes a Gang Advisory Board Meeting as a tool to share law enforcement information with its prevention and intervention partners. At these meetings, the LPD provides street outreach workers in Lowell with crime maps, allowing them to more effectively reach youth in high crime areas.

Coordinated Action Steps to Solve a Specific Problem

In a different approach to highlighting the comprehensive nature of approaches in the Shannon CSI, we focus on the efforts of New Bedford to develop a coordinated neighborhood-based approach to responding to gangs. The experiences in New Bedford highlight how well coordinated actions steps can be developed to produce a comprehensive intervention to address a specific problem, such as the early onset of gang involvement.

To provide additional services to those youth identified as at risk, the New Bedford collaborative implemented a wrap-around service delivery program specifically targeting at-risk youth living in neighborhoods with a high level of gang crime. The services include an in

The New Bedford Strategy:

After a series of community meetings, it was determined that there should be a focus on youth who were in the early stages of gang involvement. Middle schools were identified as a potential avenue to reach these at-risk youth (children between ages 12-16 living in high gang-crime neighborhoods). In order to reach this population, the New Bedford collaborative worked closely with their Local Action Research Partner to develop a school-based referral system utilizing School Resource Officers (SRO'S), guidance counselors, and administrators within the City's middle schools. At-risk youth and their families were referred for possible enrollment in the program. Intake assessments were conducted on all prospective clients to identify their most pressing needs, and subsequent referrals were made to the appropriate participating service providers. Using a "wrap-around" model, a wide range of education, job training, and counseling services were made available. Street outreach workers, clergy, and mentors are also used to connect these youth to a broad range of social services.

school tutoring program, GED program, job training, and behavioral/cognitive therapy. The New Bedford initiative is an example of how a comprehensive approach can be developed and implemented to identify and intervene in a particular community gang problem.

Comprehensive Strategies for Anti-Gang Violence Programs: A National Perspective

It is important to place the Shannon initiatives into a national perspective. The Shannon Community Safety Initiative represents the most significant gang response strategy undertaken by any of the fifty states. Until the Shannon CSI program, the only other statewide coordinated initiative to target gang and youth violence came from the Illinois Attorney General, who initiated the Gang Crime Prevention Center (GCPC) in 1995. The Illinois GCPC identified six communities and mandated a specific intervention for each community. None of the Illinois interventions were comprehensive, nor were they developed locally. While a number of other states have provided funding for anti-gang programs in local communities, these efforts were largely uncoordinated across communities, lacked a comprehensive focus and did not include research partnerships.

A number of federal initiatives have also been piloted in response to gangs. These include the Anti Gang Initiative (AGI), piloted by the Office of Community Oriented Policing (COPS) in 1996. The AGI funded policing efforts in fifteen cities, but was largely unsuccessful in its efforts to address community gang problems.^{viii} The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has attempted to aid communities in implementing comprehensive strategies in a number of initiatives including Safe Futures in six communities in the 1990's, a Comprehensive Gang Model (commonly known as the Spergel Model) in five communities in the late 1990's, the Little Village Project in Chicago, and the Gang Suppression Project in 2004. These efforts have met with mixed results. In general, they failed to implement the comprehensive model successfully. Most importantly, they lacked the accountability from each of the component parts that is necessary for a comprehensive intervention to succeed. The lack of accountability was often accompanied by a lack of cooperation and communication among the partners.

One consistent finding emerges across these projects and sites: the comprehensive strategy is difficult to implement. In their recent

review of comprehensive gang intervention strategies, gang experts Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson (2006) conclude that a fully comprehensive model has yet to be successfully implemented in any of the federally led initiatives.^{ix} The early feedback from the Shannon initiative seems to run counter to this experience. There appear to be a number of reasons for the initial successes in Massachusetts. First, substantial funding was provided to communities with the expressed purpose of developing and fostering the comprehensive strategy. All communities were strongly encouraged to adopt programs that included all five strategy areas thereby creating a comprehensive approach to gang violence in their community. This mandate was made clear to all sites selected to participate in the initiative, and capability to identify, support and implement each of the strategies was a criteria for initial funding decisions. Second, from the start, the state provided careful oversight of program design and implementation. This included the requirement that community proposals include a problem definition phase and the development of strategies closely tied to the problem in the local community. Subsequently, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security has required quarterly reporting of a substantive nature. Third, the inclusion of a local research partner as a fully participating member with many of the grantee communities and a statewide research partner that had coordination responsibility complimented these local action research partnerships appears to have helped communities foster a comprehensive approach. Finally, the regular meetings and training provided additional support for the continued use of the comprehensive model.

Challenges of Comprehensive Approach

As mentioned above, developing and maintaining a comprehensive approach to reducing gang violence is a complicated and difficult endeavor. Most of the prior efforts at implementing this kind of a comprehensive approach nationally have fallen short of their ultimate goals. To help Shannon CSI communities continue to build and enhance their comprehensive strategies in the future, we identify some common challenges that communities face in sustaining comprehensive approaches.

- **Interventions not actually targeting the problem.** Many interventions include programs or activities that may be successful but never reach the target population. This is particularly

challenging as communities attempt to develop broad-based comprehensive solutions to their gang problem. Different partners may wish to shift the focus of the initiative to other groups or locations more in line with their particular interests. For example, a job readiness program may not want to work with gang involved youth, or some after school programs may never reach youth from the target area. It is essential that program continually assess whether their efforts are reaching the youth they were originally intended to address. The action step exercise can be a useful strategy to overcome this problem if it is used consistently and the groups hold partners accountable for their designated activities in the plan.

- **Disagreements or friction may develop among partner agencies.** In any broad based coalitions of agencies such as the Shannon CSI all the partner agencies may not agree on the goals or direction of the comprehensive approach. While resources will bring many groups together initially, over time friction may develop which could weaken or ultimately destroy the coalition. It is essential to address these conflicts as they develop even if they can not be resolved at the time. Often, simply acknowledging a different point of view and committing to readdress the point in the future can keep a coalition moving.
- **Staff Turnover.** One of the most significant challenges to sustaining these kinds of comprehensive approaches to gang violence is when staff who are in leadership positions in any of the partner agencies change. Staffing changes are inevitable in these kinds of informal organizations; however, it can be highly disruptive to any task force when a charismatic committed leader is replaced by an individual who is less committed to the task force or the issue. When these changes happen it is very important that the rest of the task force communicate to the new individual the existing roles and responsibilities. At the same time it is essential that other individuals be willing to fill any leadership void.
- **Organizational Turnover.** In any coalition partner agencies may leave task force for a variety of reasons. When this happens it presents an opportunity for the remaining coalition

members to revisit the roles of all involved in the coalition and, based on the sense of the group, identify new needs that should be addressed. This will help to determine which local groups might be invited to join the coalition and fill these unmet needs.

- **Premature celebration of early success.** Reducing gang violence in a community takes time and those involved in anti-gang violence efforts must realize that continued commitment will be necessary to achieve their goals. While it is important to celebrate early successes, such as individuals leaving a gang or a group successfully completing a program, those involved must view these successes as milestones on their pathway to their goal and not reasons to step back from their initial efforts.
- **Being prepared for occasional failure.** Programs that target “at-risk” youth should expect occasional failures. High-risk youth face multiple, serious challenges. Even the best programs will have setbacks. These setbacks or failures should be expected and plans should already be in place to deal individually and organizationally with these inevitable failures.

The first year of Shannon CSI has demonstrated that communities in the Commonwealth can come together to develop and implement comprehensive approaches to reduce gang violence. There is much to be celebrated about the successes of those involved in Shannon CSI to date. The successful efforts thus far, however, need to be maintained and supplemented if the communities participating in the initiative are to see long term reductions in gang violence and overall improvements in community safety.

Appendix A

Communities Funded Through the Shannon CSI Grant

In addition to funding each collaborative, funds through the Edward J. Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (Byrne JAG) were used to provide many of the funded communities with local action research partnerships.

Shannon Communities and Local Action Research Partners (LARPs) Funded in Year 1		Shannon Communities and Local Action Research Partners (LARPs) Funded in Year 2	
Community	LARP	Community	LARP
Boston	Northeastern University & Harvard University	Boston	Harvard University
Brockton	Kelley Research Associates	Brockton	Kelley Research Associates
Fall River	Crime & Justice Institute	Fall River	Crime & Justice Institute
Fitchburg	Suffolk University	Fitchburg	Suffolk University
		Framingham	
Haverhill	Boston University	Haverhill	Boston University
Holyoke/Chicopee	Pioneer Valley Planning Commission	Holyoke/Chicopee	Westfield State College
Lawrence		Lawrence	
Lowell	Harvard University	Lowell	Suffolk University
Lynn		Lynn	Children's Law Center of Massachusetts
Metropolitan Area Planning Council		Metropolitan Area Planning Council	Northeastern University
New Bedford	Northeastern University	New Bedford	Northeastern University
Southern Essex Coalition		Southern Essex Coalition	
Springfield		Springfield	Suffolk University
Taunton		Taunton	
Worcester	Clark University	Worcester	Clark University

Appendix B

Coordinating and Monitoring Program Activities in a Comprehensive Approach

The National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) (<http://www.iir.com/nygc/default.htm>) recommends the use of a grid to monitor the planning, implementation and performance of activities in each of the five strategy areas. We have included an example of this below. The specific goals will change from community to community, depending on the nature of their gang problem, and there will be multiple goals, and multiple objectives for each goal.

Goal 1:
Objective 1:

Activities	Target Population	Responsible Agency	Existing Program/Resource	Required Program /Resources	Short-Term Activity (6 months)	Long-Term Activity (1 year)

The NYGC has also developed an implementation model to monitor the implementation of key gang response programming. This model can be found at <http://www.iir.com/nygc/acgp/implementation.htm>

End Notes

- i Extensive research on gangs and communities confirms these relationships, for examples from the Denver Youth Survey see: Esbensen, F., D. Huizinga and A. Weiher, 1993. Gang and Non-gang Youth: Differences in Explanatory Factors. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 9(2):94-116; Esbensen, F. and D. Huizinga, 1993. Gangs, Drugs, and Delinquency in a Survey of Urban Youth. *Criminology*, 31(4):565-589. Additional information can be found in the findings from the Rochester Youth Development Study: Thornberry, T.P., Krohn, M., Lizotte, A. and Chard-Wierschem, D., 1993. The role of juvenile gangs in facilitating delinquent behavior. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 30:55-87; Thornberry, T.P., Lizotte, A., Krohn, M., Smith, C and Porter, P., 2003. Causes and Consequences of Delinquency: Pp. 11-46 in T. P. Thornberry and Krohn, M. (eds.) *Taking Stock of Delinquency: An Overview of Findings from Contemporary Longitudinal Studies*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers. Information on the Seattle Social Development Project can be found at Battin, S.R., Hill, K.G., Abbott, R.D., Catalano, R.F., and Hawkins, J.D., 1998. The contribution of gang membership to delinquency beyond delinquent peers. *Criminology* 36(1):93-115.
- ii Egley, A.H., 2005. *Highlights of the 2003 National Youth Gang Survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- iii Massachusetts Department of Education, 2005. Youth Risk Behavior Survey.
- iv Spergel, I. and Curry, G.D., 1993. "The National Youth Gang Survey: A Research and Development Process." In A.P. Goldstein and C.R. Huff, eds., *Gang Intervention Handbook*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- v Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention., 2002. OJJDP comprehensive gang model: A guide to assessing your community's youth gang problem. Washington, DC.
- vi Wyrick, P., 2006. Gang prevention: How to make the "front end" of your anti-gang effort work. *United States Attorneys' Bulletin*, 54 (3), 52-60.
- vii Howell, J., 1998. Youth Gangs an Overview. Washington D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Department of Justice.
- viii Decker, S., 2002. A decade of gang research: Findings of the National Institute of Justice gang portfolio. In W. L. Reed & S. H. Decker (Eds.), *Responding to gangs: Evaluation and research*, (pp.2-23). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.
- ix Klein, M. and Maxson, C., 2006. *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*. New York: Oxford University Press.

