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Seattle's Effective Strategy for Prosecuting Juvenile Firearm Offenders

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Seattle's Effective Strategy for Prosecuting Juvenile Firearm Offenders

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The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has long recognized the need for communities to develop comprehensive and collaborative efforts to reduce juvenile gun violence. Components of a collaborative gun violence reduction program can include targeted police responses, surveillance of probationers, situational crime prevention using problem-solving strategies, parental supervision, peer mediation and conflict resolution, school-based interventions, community mobilization, legislation restricting youth access to guns, and tough sentences for crimes involving firearms (OJJDP, 1999). Effective prosecution of juvenile firearm offenders is another essential component of a successful gun violence reduction program.

Statistics from the recently published *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report* (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999) reveal that although the homicide rate of juveniles has declined in recent years (after peaking in 1993), the role of firearms in homicides involving juvenile victims or juvenile offenders remains significant:

- In 1997, 56 percent of the Nation's 2,100 murder victims ages 17 and younger were killed with a firearm (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999).
- The percentage of homicides committed by juveniles with firearms increased dramatically between 1987 and 1994. By 1994, 82 percent of all homicides by juvenile offenders involved the use of a firearm (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999).
- In 1994, firearm injuries were the second leading cause of death for young people between the ages of 10 and 24 (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 1996).

The number of juveniles with access to firearms also is significant:

- In 1994, the National School Boards Association estimated that each day approximately 135,000 students nationwide carried guns into schools (Maginnis, 1995).
- In a 1995 national survey, 7.6 percent of all students reported carrying a firearm for fighting or self-defense at least once in the previous 30 days (Kann et al., 1996). This is nearly double the rate in 1990 (Weapon-carrying, 1991).
- It is estimated that 6,093 students were expelled nationally for bringing a firearm to school during the 1996–97 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

By 1994, laws in 18 States restricted the possession of handguns by juveniles, and another 14 States prohibited the possession of all firearms by juveniles (National Criminal Justice Association, 1997). An evaluation of the effectiveness of local

From the Administrator

While juvenile violence has been declining in recent years, its level remains unacceptable, as recent headlines have underscored. We know that the overwhelming majority of homicides committed by juveniles involve firearms and that an alarming number of students are coming to school armed. In the course of a single academic year, more than 100,000 students are likely to have carried a gun to school.

These disturbing events and statistics demand our comprehensive response. Public officials, community leaders, and other concerned citizens must work together to reduce juvenile gun violence. As most States restrict or prohibit the possession of firearms by juveniles, a key element in a campaign to combat gun violence is the strict enforcement of such laws and the effective prosecution of those who violate them.

This Bulletin provides helpful information about steps taken by the Seattle [Washington] Police Department and the Prosecutor's Office in King County, Washington, to strengthen the investigation and prosecution of juvenile firearm offenders. It is my hope that this information will enhance efforts to end juvenile gun violence and its tragic toll across the Nation.

John J. Wilson
Acting Administrator

gun laws and policies suggests that these laws can prevent and even reduce the number of firearm-related homicides (Howell, 1995).

Vigorous enforcement and effective prosecution of local gun laws are essential. This Bulletin details successful strategies implemented by the Seattle [WA] Police Department (SPD) and the King County [WA] Prosecutor's Office that improved the effectiveness of both the police investigation and the prosecution of juvenile firearm offenders.

The Seattle Police Department Youth Handgun Violence Initiative Grant

In 1994, the Washington State Legislature enacted a new law making it a felony-level offense for anyone under the age of 18 to own, possess, or control a firearm of any kind in Washington State.[1] The law also increased the severity of consequences for gun-related crimes committed by youth. Following the passage of this new law, SPD and the King County Prosecutor's Office announced the implementation of the SPD Youth Handgun Violence Initiative (YHVI), a coordinated enforcement and prosecution effort to remove guns from the hands of Seattle's youth. YHVI complemented the SPD's and King County Prosecutor's Office's educational effort called "Options, Choices, Consequences," a gun violence prevention program in which police officers, prosecutors, and physicians teach Seattle's middle school students about the legal and medical consequences of unlawful firearm possession and use.

The Seattle Police Department's Youth Handgun Violence Initiative was funded by a U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) grant. Ten cities throughout the country were awarded funds under this program to provide targeted and focused law enforcement efforts directed at combating the rise of youth firearm violence. SPD allocated a portion of these grant funds to employ a prosecutor dedicated to the prosecution of juvenile firearm offenders.

In addition to prosecution support, SPD allocated YHVI grant funds for a new crime analysis and mapping system, law enforcement overtime, and project evaluation. Initiative activities included:

- **Establishing School Enforcement Teams (SET's).** A coordinated school enforcement program was established involving all SPD personnel working in schools, organized by precinct, and working in unison with school district administrators and security staff. Teams met monthly. The program employed a problem-solving approach to address school problems and focused on improving communication between agencies represented on SET's. Targeted enforcement projects were initiated as needed for identified "hotspots."
- **Developing a New Crime Analysis System.** Grant funds were used to purchase software and hardware for a new Crime Analysis System to provide youth crime targeting, mapping, and tracking capabilities and to support SET activities.
- **Tracking and Prosecuting Chronic Youthful Offenders.** The King County Prosecutor's Office specifically focused on youthful offenders involved in weapons cases, creating a baseline database for tracking juvenile gun crime cases. SPD and the King County Department of Youth Services (DYS) shared information to improve tracking of chronic juvenile offenders and dissemination of information between the agencies, including offenders' probation or parole status.
- **Targeting Serious Youth Offenders.** Officers from the SPD's narcotics and gang units coordinated with SET's to address the citywide youth violence problem. The program included enforcement projects targeted at youth identified as serious offenders. These enforcement projects included partnering detectives with patrol officers and focusing resources on areas identified as having high levels of drug dealing, drug trafficking, and gang activity.
- **Performing Research and Evaluation.** The grant participants established links with University of Washington and King County Department of Public Health researchers to survey the community on program progress and hold focus groups to identify strategies to combat youth violence and firearm use.

In September 1996, representatives of SPD and the King County Prosecutor's Office implemented the new YHVI deputy prosecuting attorney (DPA) position in juvenile court dedicated exclusively to the prosecution of juveniles who committed crimes using firearms. The new DPA's goals were to:

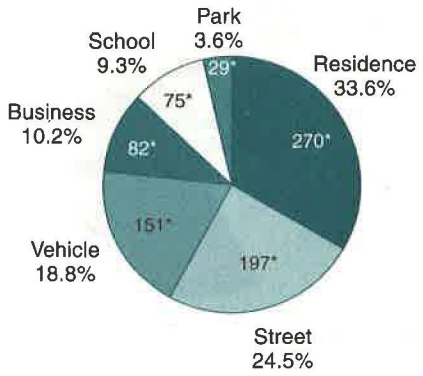
What Types of Data Were Collected?

The King County Prosecutor's Office, in consultation with the Seattle Police Department, developed a list of information to be retrieved from case files and included in the database:

- **Juvenile.**
  - Name, age, gender, and race.
  - Delinquency history.
  - School.
- **Crime.**
  - Brief description of incident, date, and time.
  - Incident address and type of location (see figure 1).
  - Victim's age, gender, race, and any injuries sustained.
  - Description of motor vehicles used.
  - Gang information (gang name or moniker).
- **Firearm.**
  - Make, model, caliber, and serial number.
  - Status of the gun: recovered? loaded? fired?
  - Description of how the gun was obtained and used by the juvenile.
- **Prefiling.**
  - Date case was received by the prosecutor.
  - Action taken by the prosecutor.
- **Court Proceedings.**
  - Charges filed against the juvenile.
  - Standard range of sentences for charges filed.
  - Results of transfer hearings (waiver to adult court).
  - Adjudications (trials and dismissals).
  - Dispositions (sentences imposed and modification hearings).

[1] The Revised Code of Washington (RCW 9.41.010 (1)) defines a firearm as "a weapon or device from which a projectile or projectiles may be fired by an explosive such as gunpowder." This includes handguns, rifles, and shotguns.

Figure 1: Location of Juvenile Firearm Incidents (King County, WA, 804 Cases, January 1994–May 1997)



*Number of cases.

- Increase the effectiveness of the prosecution of juvenile firearm offenders by identifying and tracking juvenile offenders throughout the judicial process.
- Improve the efficiency at every stage of prosecution.
- Improve the coordination of law enforcement and prosecution efforts.
- Provide training and legal advice to law enforcement personnel.
- Perform a statistical analysis of juvenile firearm offenses for the previous 3 years for comparison with the first grant year.

In April 1999, the city of Seattle and King County received additional funding under OJJDP's Juvenile Accountability Incentive Block Grants (JAIBG) program. The prosecutor employed under this grant will continue and expand upon the programs implemented during the initial COPS grant, work with the recently formed King County Violent Firearms Crime Coalition to conduct training seminars for law enforcement officers within the county, and coordinate investigation and prosecution efforts with the U.S. Department of the Treasury Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Juvenile Firearm Database

The prosecutor's office creates a case file for each delinquency case filed in juvenile court. The case file contains a copy of the police report, copies of all court documents, information on each juvenile's offending history, a complete record of the incident, and details of what happened procedurally in the case. The DPA designed a computer database system for tracking firearm offenders through the court system. This database supplemented the court's existing computer system (Juvenile Justice Wide Area Network) and contained additional descriptive information about the juvenile and his or her offense.

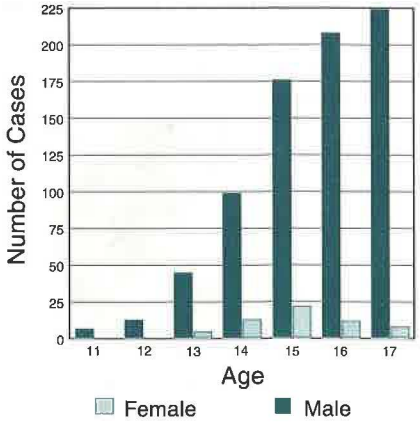
The database included all cases where a firearm either was used in the commission of a crime or was unlawfully possessed by the juvenile. It allowed the prosecutor to quickly and easily monitor, evaluate, and prepare cases for court hearings and identify serious, violent, and chronic offenders. Data were collected during the first 9 months (September 1, 1996, to May 31, 1997) of the DPA grant period. The database also included information on all King County juvenile firearm cases for the preceding 3 years, information that was used to generate baseline statistics to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. The database helped the DPA to identify problem areas and common weaknesses in the prosecution of these cases that he could then address in his legal research and training sessions. Using the database, the prosecutor analyzed police reports from hundreds of firearm cases to determine how investigations could be improved.

Trends and Characteristics of Juvenile Firearm Offenses in King County, WA

Through his examination of 840 King County juvenile firearm cases from January 1994 through May 1997, the DPA was able to examine the trends and characteristics of juvenile firearm offenses.[2]

- **What Are the Characteristics of Juvenile Firearm Offenders?**
  - Juvenile court handles cases involving juveniles ages 8 to 17. Juvenile firearm offenders are generally among the older segment of this population, with more than half of all juvenile offenses committed by youth ages 16 and 17. (More than 80 percent of robberies and assaults by juveniles using firearms are committed by youth age 15 or older, while the majority of burglaries by juveniles where firearms are stolen are committed by youth age 15 or younger.)
  - The number of male offenders rises steadily with age. The number of female offenders peaks at age 15 and then begins to decline. Female juveniles often become involved with firearms through their boyfriends, who are typically a year or two older. This may explain the female juvenile offender peak at age 15, when many girls begin dating (see figure 2).
  - Less than 7 percent of all juvenile firearm crimes are committed by females. Female juveniles are more likely to be involved in property or possession crimes involving firearms and are rarely involved in violent firearm offenses.
  - The majority of juvenile firearm offenders (58 percent) have at least one delinquency adjudication on their record. Another 20 percent have had some type of court referral, but no adjudications. Only 22 percent of all juvenile firearm offenders have no

Figure 2: Age of Juvenile Firearm Offenders (King County, WA, January 1994–May 1997)



[2] To put the number of juvenile firearm cases in perspective, the population of King County, WA, was approximately 1.6 million people in 1996.

record of any prior delinquent activity (see figure 3).

- ❖ Juveniles who commit robberies with firearms tend to have lengthier delinquency histories than juveniles who commit other types of firearm offenses.
- ❖ The average juvenile firearm offender's delinquency history includes one prior felony-level adjudication, one-and-a-half prior misdemeanor-level adjudications, and four other prior juvenile court referrals.
- ❖ Only 12 percent of juvenile firearm offenders have had a prior adjudication or referral for a firearm-related offense.

◆ **When Do Firearm Crimes Occur?**

- ❖ The rate of juvenile gun crime is generally higher during the school months, declining slightly in the summer, and falling sharply in December. These results follow general trends in juvenile crime in King County.
- ❖ The number of juvenile offenses involving firearms peaks in the late evening (10 p.m.). Another smaller peak in firearm activity is seen in the afternoon (2 p.m.), mostly in connection with burglaries.

◆ **Where Do Juvenile Offenders Get Their Guns?**

For the majority of firearm offenses examined, it is not known where or how juveniles acquired guns. Data on the cases where the source of the firearm is known revealed the following:

- ❖ The firearm was stolen by the user or later confirmed as stolen by someone else in 39 percent of the cases.
- ❖ The firearm was obtained from a friend or relative in 42 percent of the cases. Juveniles often receive firearms from their friends, usually at their school or home. It is also common for juveniles to take their parents' guns and bring them to school, give them to other juveniles, or use them in violent crimes. Juveniles often say they needed to take the gun for "protection."
- ❖ The firearm was purchased by the juvenile in only 15 percent of the cases. Typically, a juvenile purchaser admits buying the gun on the street from an unidentified person for between $50 and $100.
- ❖ The firearm was claimed to have been "found" by the juvenile in 4 percent of the cases.

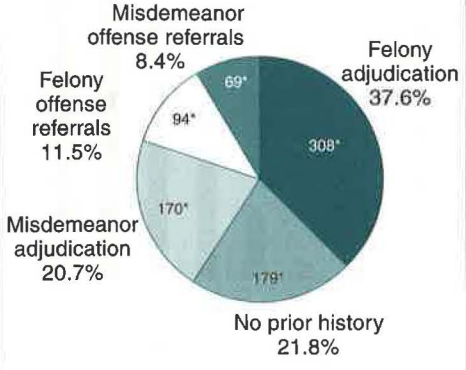
◆ **How Are Firearms Used by Juvenile Offenders?**

- ❖ When committing a robbery using a firearm, juvenile offenders rarely fire their guns (8 percent of all incidents). The gun is primarily used for intimidation.
- ❖ In felony assault cases involving a firearm, the weapon was fired by the juvenile in 63 percent of the cases and injury resulted in 43 percent of those cases. (A felony assault with a firearm may occur when the offender points a gun at the victim, whether or not any shots were fired or any injury resulted.)
- ❖ Seventy-four percent of all guns recovered from juvenile offenders were found to be loaded. Of the juveniles who possessed unloaded guns, one-third also possessed ammunition for the gun.

◆ **What Types of Firearms Are Used by Juvenile Offenders?**

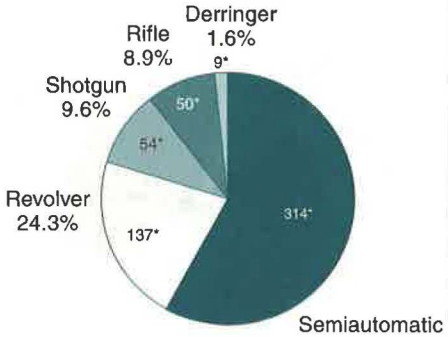
- ❖ Semiautomatic handguns are the weapon of choice for most juveniles and are involved in more than half of all juvenile firearm offenses (see figure 4).
- ❖ Most juvenile firearm offenses are committed with handguns, with only 18 percent involving shotguns or rifles.

Figure 3: Delinquency History of Juvenile Firearm Offenders (King County, WA, 820 Cases, January 1994–May 1997)



*Number of cases.

Figure 4: Types of Firearms Used by Juvenile Offenders (King County, WA, 564 Incidents, January 1994–May 1997)



*Number of incidents.

Note: Percentages do not total 100 because of rounding.

Prosecution of Juvenile Firearm Offenders

As is the case with most offender populations, among juvenile offenders a small number of serious, violent, and chronic offenders commit the majority of serious juvenile crime (Howell, 1995). Through a joint planning effort of the Tracking and Prosecuting Chronic Youthful Offenders component of the YHVI grant, SPD and King County Prosecutor's Office representatives agreed that a top priority for both agencies was getting the most serious juvenile firearm offenders "off the street."

The grant allowed the DPA to specialize in the prosecution of juvenile firearm offenders. He could carry an overall reduced workload, allowing him to focus on serious cases, develop expertise, and gather extensive and detailed information on juvenile offenders to assist him in preparing and presenting his cases. Because of this expertise, the DPA was able to make quicker decisions, could expedite the filing of cases, and had more knowledge of "how the system works," what to look for in cases, and how cases would be viewed by the courts.

Vertical Prosecution

In "vertical" prosecution, a single prosecutor handles each case through every stage of the court process, including the initial police investigation and followup, case filing, arraignment and detention hearings, pretrial hearings, guilty pleas, adjudicatory hearings, and dispositional hearings.

Vertical prosecution, which is labor intensive and time consuming, is not the traditional practice in the King County juvenile division, where specialized units handle the various phases of each juvenile case as it is processed through the court system.

The DPA practiced vertical prosecution for juvenile firearm cases, handling and supervising a case from the time it was first received until it was resolved. In cases involving serious violent offenses, the DPA would often accompany the assigned detective to the crime scene during the investigation process. Each of these cases was successfully adjudicated. During the grant period, approximately 25 firearm-related cases were filed each month, including felony-level possession, burglary, and violent crimes.

Vertical prosecution resulted in greater continuity and consistency in prosecution. The DPA reviewed prior juvenile firearm cases that went to trial but did not result in an adjudication of delinquency to identify the problems and issues involved in their prosecution. He conducted legal research and wrote trial briefs to address the specific legal issues involved in firearm crimes.

The additional emphasis the prosecutor placed on prosecuting juvenile firearm offenders had a direct impact on how these cases were handled by juvenile court judges and probation officers. The DPA worked to educate judges and probation officers about the legal issues related to, and the serious nature of, firearm offenses and offenders. As a result, probation officers were more likely to join in the prosecutor's recommendations to the court. If the juvenile had any prior involvement with firearms, the DPA, because of his access to and knowledge of the offender's history, was able to provide a more comprehensive report of such activities to the court. Consequently, the courts were more receptive to the DPA's arguments and recommendations, and judges' rulings on firearm-related issues became more consistent.

Sharing of Expertise Through Training

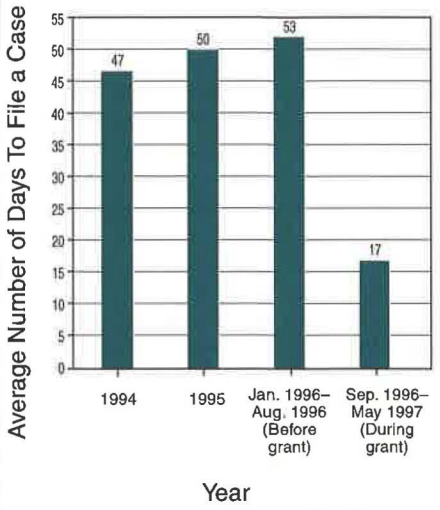
The Seattle Police Department and the DPA agreed that the prosecutor should implement a training program for SPD officers and detectives to improve the quality of cases they submitted for prosecution. In December 1996, the DPA conducted 32 rollcall training sessions for SPD officers on all watches at each of Seattle's 4 precincts. The DPA also provided special training for gang unit and juvenile detectives. Officers and detectives were instructed on the specific information needed for the prosecutor to file a successful case. They also were given suggestions to improve their investigation and report writing. For example, the prosecutor explained the importance of addressing issues of gun operability, firearm possession, and the age of offender in incident reports because this information was vital to presenting a strong case. Simply having the officer ask the offender his or her age repeatedly (before and after Miranda warnings and during booking) and including the information in the report can make a significant difference because the offender's age is an element of the crime of unlawful possession of a firearm and can sometimes be difficult to establish. Immediately following the training sessions, the DPA saw a dramatic improvement in the quality of cases submitted by SPD. These improvements led to a 50-percent reduction in the dismissal rate for firearm cases because fewer cases were found to have legal or factual problems.

Many juvenile firearm cases involve weapons found in vehicles (see figure 1). When more than one juvenile occupies the vehicle, questions arise about who, if anyone, may be charged with unlawful possession of the firearm. The DPA researched the legal issues related to the possession and constructive possession of firearms and passed this information along to SPD during training sessions. As a result, clear standards were formulated for charging decisions. Under certain circumstances, for example, it is possible to charge more than one juvenile for possession of a single firearm.

The training sessions also provided a valuable link between SPD personnel and the prosecutor, opening a channel of communication that was used extensively by both sides. The DPA offered himself as a legal resource on firearm-related issues and typically received 10 to 20 calls per week from officers and detectives with questions.

In the 3 years preceding the grant, long delays in filing a case would often occur because cases needed to be returned to the police agency for more information. After the training session, police reports improved and fewer cases needed to be sent back for more information. When more information was required, the DPA knew who to call to obtain the followup quickly. As a result, the average time needed to file a case was reduced from 53 to 17 days, and filing backlogs were eliminated (see figure 5). The increased coordination between the DPA and SPD detectives

Figure 5: Average Number of Days To File a Case (King County, WA, January 1994–May 1997)



resulted in the filing of stronger and more complete cases and a reduction in the number of cases that needed to be reevaluated, be dismissed, or have their charges reduced in plea negotiations.

Summary of Project Successes

The DPA helped to ensure that juvenile firearm offenders in King County were held fully accountable for their crimes. In cases where the juvenile is charged with a serious violent firearm offense, has an extensive offender history, and has exhausted all of the rehabilitative resources of the juvenile justice system, the prosecuting attorney may bring a motion asking the court to waive juvenile jurisdiction and transfer the case to (adult) criminal court. The prosecutor has the burden of proving that transferring jurisdiction is in the best interests of either the juvenile or the community. These motions are brought against only the most serious and dangerous offenders. The standard of proof is very high, and juvenile courts transfer only a handful of cases each year. During the grant period, the DPA was in a unique position to identify, assess, and prepare those cases that were better suited for the criminal court. As a result, more cases involving serious, violent, and chronic juvenile firearm offenders were transferred for criminal prosecution.

Each juvenile offense carries a standard range of detention time. This range is

based upon the seriousness of the offense and the juvenile's offense history. Usually, the court is required to enter a disposition within the standard range. However, in certain cases, the standard range may be insufficient to appropriately address the juvenile's rehabilitative needs and/or provide for adequate accountability. If certain statutory aggravating factors are present (e.g., the offense was committed in an especially heinous, cruel, or depraved manner; the juvenile inflicted serious bodily injury to another; the juvenile has recent criminal history or has failed to comply with the terms of community supervision), the prosecutor may bring a motion asking the court to impose an exceptional sentence above the standard range. During the grant period, the DPA developed an indepth knowledge of juvenile firearm offenders, their offense histories, and the specific facts of each and every firearm case. Therefore, the DPA was able to accurately identify those cases where the standard range was inadequate and was able to more effectively argue in favor of exceptional sentences. Consequently, the number of exceptional sentences imposed during the grant period increased, resulting in additional time for the rehabilitation of the more serious and chronic offenders.

The DPA also improved the efficiency and effectiveness of prosecution efforts. The additional emphasis on the prosecution of firearm offenders influenced the way police agencies, the courts, and the probation department handled these juveniles. Through the collaborative efforts of the DPA and the Seattle Police Department, significant improvements were made in virtually every aspect of the prosecution of juvenile firearm offenders, including the following:

- Communication improved between the prosecutor, police, judges, and probation officers.
- Police investigation and incident report quality improved, resulting in a higher adjudication rate for firearm cases.
- Delinquency charges and cases against juvenile offenders were filed faster.
- More cases where the juvenile was detained were successfully "rush" filed (i.e., an incustody case was filed within 72 hours), an increase from 86 percent to 91 percent.
- Filing backlogs were eliminated.
- More juveniles were detained at their first appearance hearing, an increase from 83 percent to 94 percent.
- The pretrial dismissal rate was reduced by one-half.
- The length of time needed to adjudicate gun cases was reduced.
- Successful adjudication rates at trial increased from 65 percent to 78 percent (see figure 6).

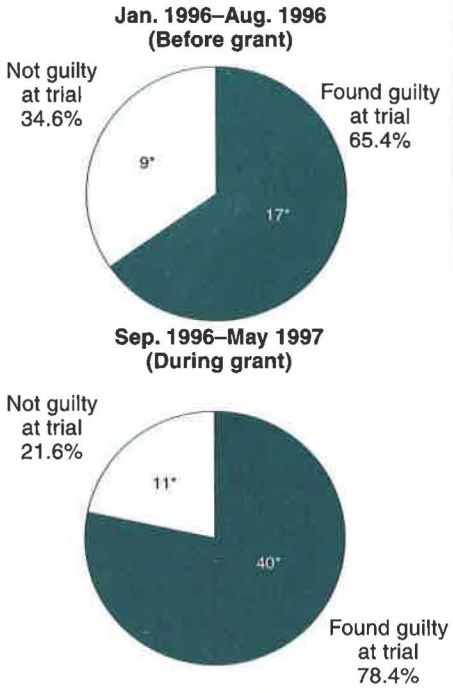
Stronger cases and an improved filing policy meant fewer cases were reduced during plea negotiations. With fewer plea offers being made, defense attorneys were more likely to set the cases for trial. During the grant period, the number of firearm cases that went to trial doubled. Due to the training and research efforts of the DPA, those cases that went to trial were better prepared. As a result, the dismissal rate went down, the adjudication rate went up (the adjudication rate at trial rose by 13 percent, with four out of five trials ending in a guilty verdict), and the number of transferred cases increased, resulting in a record number of successfully adjudicated cases.

Examples of Firearm Cases

More than half of all felony firearm cases in King County, WA, that go to trial involve simple possession of a gun. Possession of a firearm may be actual or constructive. Constructive possession cases are some of the most challenging to prosecute. Constructive possession occurs when the firearm is not on the juvenile's person, but the juvenile has dominion and control over the firearm or the premises where the firearm is found. Evidence of dominion and control includes the juvenile's proximity to the firearm, his or her ownership or control of the premises where the firearm is found (e.g., the juvenile is the driver of the car in which a gun is found), or the juvenile's present ability to gain actual possession of the firearm.

Case 1: W.M., 17 years old. W.M. was driving a car with an adult in the front passenger seat. Police stopped the car for a traffic infraction and recovered a gun from the glove compartment. The adult admitted that the gun was his and pled guilty to being a felon in possession of a firearm. W.M. was charged with possession of the same firearm because he was the driver of the car and was therefore in constructive possession of the firearm. The court found W.M. guilty as charged.

Figure 6: Adjudication Rates at Trial (King County, WA, 77 Cases, January 1996–May 1997)



*Number of cases.

Case 2: C.W., 16 years old. C.W. was seen by police inside a parked vehicle. C.W. got out of the car, locked the door, and walked away. Officers approached the car and saw a handgun in plain view on the driver's floorboard. C.W. was detained, and the car keys were found on his person. C.W. denied any knowledge of the gun. The court found C.W. guilty of the illegal possession of a firearm based on the State's constructive possession argument.

Another common juvenile firearm scenario is the "accidental shooting" case.

Case 3: T.W., 15 years old. T.W. brought a gun to school and showed it to his friends. On their way home from school through the woods, T.W. and his friends were approached by a 10-year-old boy. T.W. showed the gun to the boy and demonstrated how to load and unload the magazine. The boy said he did not believe it was a real gun, so T.W. pointed it at the boy to scare him. The magazine was not in the gun, and T.W. thought it was unloaded, but there was still a round in the chamber. T.W. pulled the trigger and shot the boy in the shoulder. T.W.

was convicted of second-degree felony assault (i.e., intentional assault that recklessly inflicts substantial bodily harm).

Case 4: J.S., 17 years old. J.S. and his 17-year-old friend Tim bought a semiautomatic Uzi from their 18-year-old friend, stole some ammunition from a local gun shop, and went to a quarry to practice firing the gun. Some time later, J.S. and Tim decided to steal a car, and they took the Uzi along "for protection." Tim was under the dashboard trying to hot wire the car and J.S. was holding a flashlight and the Uzi when the Uzi "accidentally" went off. Tim was shot in the head and killed. J.S. pled guilty to first-degree manslaughter (i.e., recklessly causing death).

Lessons Learned About Prosecution and Police Partnering

The experience of the King County Prosecutor's Office and the Seattle Police Department during the grant period produced useful information about interagency partnering.

- Collaboration among agencies can take time and persistence, especially when the partnership is new. Working out program issues and details among agencies and including all the appropriate players can be a complicated process, even when agencies have agreed to collaborate on a new program.
- Selecting a prosecutor who has real interest in and enthusiasm for the particular project is essential.
- Flexibility is important. SPD adjusted its program to fit the talents and skills of the prosecutor chosen for the project, and the prosecutor's office allowed him the freedom to work with SPD to refine the program to best meet the goals of the grant.
- All agencies in a partnership benefit. Improving communication between the police and prosecutor had a big payoff in the creation of stronger cases.
- A new program does not have to be costly. The Seattle YHVI program included a database component. Another agency interested in starting a similar program could use the database information from this pilot project to guide the creation of its own program without duplicating the database component of the grant. An agency could restructure to create a half-time prosecutor position to perform the law enforcement liaison and prosecutor functions of the YHVI grant position.

Conclusion

The strategies outlined in this Bulletin have proved highly effective in improving the prosecution of juvenile offenders. Although this project focused exclusively on firearm cases, the basic framework and methodology can also easily be applied to other types of crimes.

- Assign a prosecutor to specialize in a particular type of case (e.g., firearms, drugs, domestic violence, etc.).
- Develop a case management system to track targeted cases.
- Identify serious and chronic offenders.
- Identify problems with and areas of weakness in prior cases.
- Practice vertical prosecution.
- Conduct research and prepare "stock" briefs for recurring legal arguments.
- Conduct training sessions for law enforcement officers and fellow prosecutors.
- Coordinate the handling of targeted cases between law enforcement agencies and the prosecutor's office.

While additional funding and staff will speed up the implementation process, many of these improvements can be made by simply reallocating and restructuring existing resources. The two key ingredients are specialization and close partnerships with law enforcement.

For Further Information

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Figures in this Bulletin are adapted from the authors' YHVI report, *An Analysis of the Prosecution of Juvenile Firearm Offenses.* For a complete copy of the report, which includes comprehensive demographic, geographic, and statistical information about the juvenile firearm offenders and offenses studied under Seattle's YHVI grant, contact OJJDP's Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse at 800–638–8736 (phone), puborder@ncjrs.org (e-mail), www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org (Internet).

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