

**PSI**

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# FOCUSED DETERRENCE PART 1

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# Introduction

Focused deterrence strategies aim to reduce violence by concentrating on individuals or groups responsible for violence in a community. Community violence has profound consequences, with the most significant concern being its impact on public safety and community trust (Braga, Apel, & Welsh, 2013). As Thomas Abt (2019) emphasizes in *Bleeding Out*, most violence happens among a small group of people and in certain urban areas, often called "hot spots." Abt points out that a lot of violent crimes are committed by a few individuals, many of whom have a history of criminal behavior. Because violence is concentrated in these specific people and places, it's important to focus interventions on them to reduce crime and improve safety. Focused deterrence seeks to address this need by targeting individuals who are most responsible for violent crime (Braga & Weisburd, 2012).

While this review references Memphis, TN as an example, its analysis is not limited to this location. Instead, Memphis serves as a case study in assessing the fidelity of focused deterrence practices and evaluating whether such strategies require scaling up or adaptation in other jurisdictions.

Shelby County, including Memphis, has struggled with persistently high levels of violent crime, particularly gun violence and homicides. In 2024, the city of Memphis reported 296 homicides, marking a 25% decline from 2023, when 398 people were killed (Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, 2023; Tennessee Bar Association, 2025). However, the city's violent crime rate remains one of the highest in the nation, with the FBI reporting 2,612 violent crimes per 100,000 residents in 2023 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2024).

In 2024, the University of Memphis Public Safety Institute issued an initial process evaluation of the City of Memphis Violence Intervention Program, which encompasses its focused deterrence approach. The evaluation is available at <https://memphis.edu/psi/research/>.

This review will be the first of a series centered around the theme of focused deterrence. The current review outlines the core functions of focused deterrence, reviews recent research evaluating its effectiveness, and examines the history of focused deterrence strategies in Memphis, particularly in addressing firearm violence.

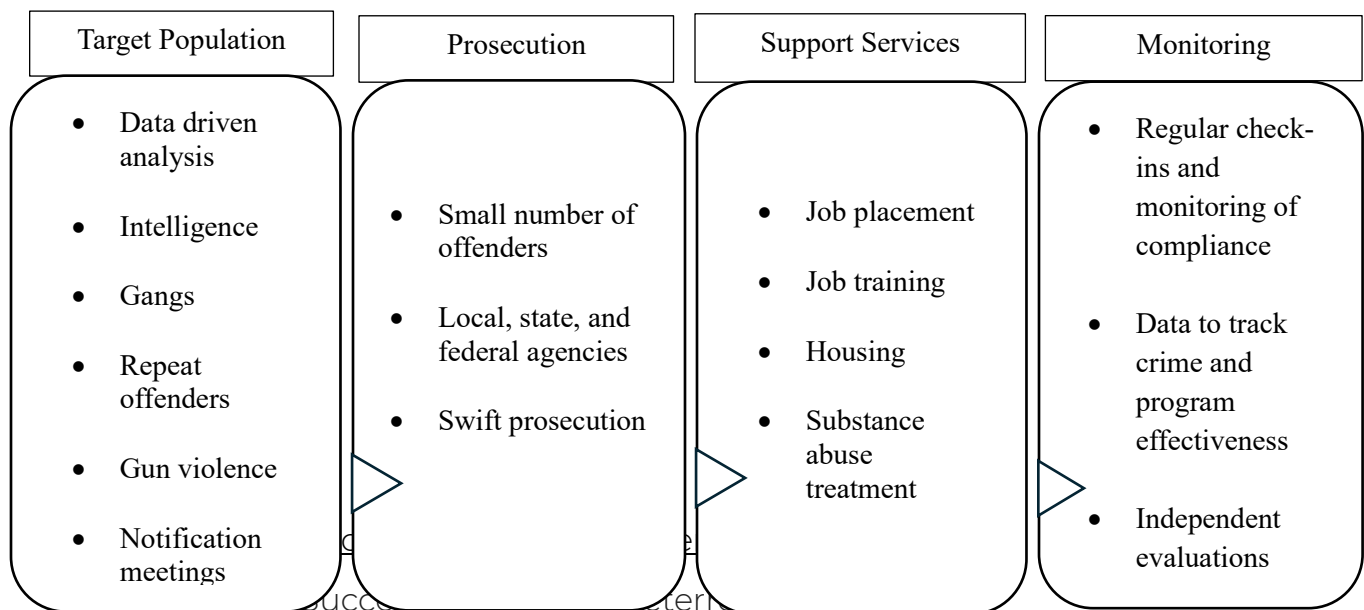
# Focused Deterrence Approach



The core concept of focused deterrence is to deliver a clear message to high-risk individuals that violence will no longer be tolerated and that further involvement in crime will result in swift and certain consequences (Braga & Weisburd, 2012; Mourtgos & Adams, 2020). This strategy also provides individuals with pathways to leave a life of crime, including access to education, job training, and social services such as mental health or substance abuse treatment (Braga, Weisburd, & Turchan, 2019; Chalfin & McCrary, 2017; Zicari, 2021).

Community members play a crucial role by engaging directly with individuals involved in violence, making it clear that their actions are unacceptable. Focused deterrence operates through three primary interventions: Group Violence Intervention (GVI), Drug Market Intervention (DMI), and individual offender programs. GVI has been particularly effective in reducing gun violence and gang-related crime (Kennedy, 2011), while DMI is more targeted toward curbing drug markets by intervening with those most deeply involved in drug trafficking (National Network for Safe Communities, 2019). Individual offender programs focus on reducing recidivism by addressing the needs of repeat offenders through tailored support and deterrence strategies (Braga, Weisburd, & Turchan, 2018). Research on these strategies has highlighted differences in their application and outcomes. While the core principles remain consistent across all approaches, the evidence suggests that each intervention can have distinct impacts depending on the type of crime and the specific needs of the target population.

### Using Strong Community Partnerships, Intelligence and Law Enforcement to Reduce Violent Crime





Oakland, California's Operation Ceasefire, implemented in 2011, became a national model for reducing gun violence. Because the focused deterrence strategy was implemented, Oakland saw a 31% reduction in gun homicides (Braga et al., 2018). The success of Oakland's approach was due to its evidence-based strategy, which relied on data and intelligence to identify individuals most likely to commit or fall victim to gun violence (City of Oakland, 2023). This identification process aligns with the deterrence theme, while partnerships with community members and social service providers highlight the community engagement and social services theme. Oakland's approach followed the Group Violence Intervention (GVI) model, which targets street group-involved violence through direct communication with group members, offering social services, and setting clear legal consequences for continued violence (City of Oakland, 2023). However, in 2020, the City of Oakland began to move away from Operation Ceasefire, and homicide rates subsequently increased, rising from 16.2 per 100,000 residents in 2018 to 27.8 in 2022 (City of Oakland, 2023). Similar patterns have been observed in homicide reduction efforts elsewhere. Focused deterrence has been linked to statistically significant decreases in homicide rates, particularly when targeting gang-related violence (Braga, Weisburd, & Turchan, 2019). In Stockton, California, the Stockton Ceasefire program, launched in 1997, primarily used the Group Violence Intervention (GVI) strategy (Crime and Justice Policy Lab, 2024). This approach led to lower citywide homicide rates during its implementation compared to periods when the program was not in place (Braga et al., 2024).

The next section of the report will examine how the core policies of focused deterrence—identification of high-risk individuals, notification to those individuals, enforcement and prosecution, support services for those who want them, and sustained follow up—fit within the balanced framework of deterrence, community engagement, and services. Strategic prosecution aligns with the deterrence approach, ensuring legal consequences for violent behavior, while social services support the community engagement aspect by providing pathways for individuals to change. Sustained follow-up ties all three approaches together, reinforcing both the deterrence of further violence and the ongoing community support necessary for long-term change.

## **Methods Of Identifying High Risk Individuals**

The first step in ensuring the success of focused deterrence is identifying high-risk individuals who are most likely to be involved in serious violent behavior. This process requires conducting an audit in collaboration with community leaders and law enforcement to pinpoint individuals who are driving violence (Rand Corporation, 2025). An audit may involve gathering insights from patrol officers about what they

observe on the streets (such as gang activity or drug markets), analyzing recent violent incidents to identify individuals at risk of future involvement in violence, or working with community members to determine who is exerting control over criminal activity (Rand Corporation, 2025).

Additionally, two valuable tools for this process are crime mapping and social network analysis. Crime mapping identifies geographic hotspots where crimes are most concentrated, allowing law enforcement to apply focused deterrence strategies in high-risk areas while minimizing disruption to broader communities (Boba, 2001). Social network analysis examines relationships and connections within a community using data from arrest and court records, interviews, surveys, and emails (Papachristos & Sierra-Arévalo, 2018). When used together, these tools help identify crime patterns and key offenders more effectively.

### *Practices in Memphis*

The current Memphis model identifies high-risk individuals for call-ins (see below) by focusing on those on probation or parole as designated by the Tennessee Department of Correction. On the other hand, for individual notification meetings (see below) individuals are identified primarily by law enforcement. Targeting individuals on parole or probation as the primary focus for identifying high-risk individuals may not always be the best approach because 1) many individuals on probation are not involved in violent crime but serving time for lower level offenses, and focused deterrence is most effective when identifying violent groups or individuals with strong ties to shootings; 2) violent crime is often committed by younger individuals, between the ages of 16 and 30, so those paroled after long sentences may have already aged out of the high-risk category by the time they are released; and 3) a broad focus on parolees/probationers could dilute efforts, leading to unnecessary surveillance of low-risk individuals and to inefficient use of resources.

## **Call-Ins and Notification Meetings: Engaging in High-Risk Individuals**

Once high-risk individuals are identified, the next step in focused deterrence strategies is to engage them through call-ins and notification meetings (Rief & Iratzoqui, 2024). These approaches serve as direct interventions designed to discourage further criminal activity while offering pathways to positive change.

## Call-Ins

Call-ins are formal, group-based interventions, where law enforcement, community leaders, and social service providers meet with multiple high-risk individuals. These meetings typically take place in a neutral place like a community center, social service agency, or church (National Network for Safe Communities, 2017). Typically, during the meeting, individuals can expect four key components:

1. A list of charges and potential consequences if their violent behavior continues;
2. Evidence that law enforcement can use to convict them;
3. A discussion with family, friends, and community members about the impact of their actions; and
4. A list of available resources, including services and support, should they choose to change their path.

## Notification Meetings

Notification meetings are typically individualized, or one-on-one, interventions with law enforcement officers and social service providers. These meetings are done when an individual cannot attend a formal call-in. In this meeting, law enforcement reinforces the same messages of a call-in that continued violent behavior will result in swift legal consequences, and a social service representative offers support, connecting individuals to resources. These meetings can happen through going to the individual's home, phone calls, or letters, and they provide a flexible way to ensure that individuals still receive the necessary information and support (Ward et al., 2023).

## *Practices in Memphis*

In Memphis, the Group Violence Intervention Program (GVIP) is currently run through the city mayor's office and collaborates with the Tennessee Department of Correction, the U.S. Attorney's office, the Shelby County District Attorney's office, and the Memphis Police Department to deliver a direct and clear message to individuals involved in or at risk of engaging in violent crime: the violence must stop (City of Memphis, 2022). Call-in participants receive a dual message—that they are cared for, that resources, including referrals to services and pathways to employment, are available to them and that they will be held accountable if they do not change their violent behavior. The only requirement is that they refrain from further violence (City of Memphis, 2022). In addition to call-ins, GVIP employs one-on-one notifications, also



known as house calls, where law enforcement officers and community representatives visit individuals identified as high-risk. These personalized visits communicate the same message of accountability and support, tailored to the individual's circumstances. This approach builds trust and offers a more direct form of engagement. Both call-ins and house calls are designed to be key components of Memphis' focused deterrence strategy, combining the promise of assistance with the certainty of legal consequences to reduce violent crime.

## Strategic Prosecution

Once individuals or groups have been notified about their violent behavior, they are given two choices: (1) stop engaging in violence or (2) continue committing criminal acts and face the consequences. Police, prosecutors, and corrections officers collaborate to focus on identifying high-risk individuals using seven key strategies, which overlap with the identification process:

1. **Pre-arrest monitoring** – Keeping a close watch on areas where the high-risk individual is most active;
2. **Arrest** – Serving warrants and building new cases;
3. **Prosecution** – High-risk individuals receive extra attention, with a dedicated prosecutor managing their cases, recommending harsher penalties, and prioritizing conviction;
4. **Sentencing** – Post-release monitoring, including regular drug tests, home visits, and strict supervision conditions;
5. **Disrupting crime hotspots** – Law enforcement targeting high-crime areas, such as open-air drug markets, to deter criminal activity;
6. **Monitoring feuds** – Tracking conflicts between individuals and warning them to stop the violence; and
7. **Seizing illegal assets** – Confiscating money or property obtained through illegal means (Scott, 2017).

A major decision in this stage is whether to build a prosecutable case against offenders before warning them. In cities like High Point, North Carolina, and Nashville, TN, law enforcement agencies prepare cases in advance, presenting offenders with a choice during the notification meeting: cease criminal activity or face immediate prosecution. In other focused deterrence interventions, however, cases are not built ahead of time and are only pursued if the individual continues to offend (Scott, 2017).

Some programs have found that having both local and federal prosecutors as partners is crucial to ensuring effective prosecution and making strategic decisions about legal action (Scott, 2017).

### *Practices in Memphis*

Under the current focused deterrence approach in Memphis, prosecutable cases are not determined in advance. A weakness may be failure to track all within the focused deterrence program to determine whether they have picked up new charges. Disrupting crime hotspots does occur through the Memphis Police Department's Operation Code Zero. Monitoring feuds does occur to some degree through a number of street outreach programs, but they need scaling up.

## **Support Services: Providing Pathways to Positive Change**

Social services play a vital role in helping high-risk individuals stay on the right path and reducing recidivism, as many people are unaware of the resources available to them. The most common services include job training, educational programs, and mental health or substance abuse counseling (Reichert, 2017). The goal of incorporating social services is to equip individuals with the tools they need to make better choices and build a life away from violence and illegal activities. Social workers and community organizations work closely with these individuals to provide guidance and address their specific needs. To truly turn their lives around, individuals need meaningful opportunities, and social services help make those opportunities more accessible.

### *Practices in Memphis*

The current intervention initiative as listed on the City of Memphis website (2023) includes local organizations like United Way's Driving the Dream, the University of Tennessee Health Science Center's Center for Youth Advocacy and Well-Being, and the City of Memphis Office of Community Affairs' Manhood University. Ongoing connections with Regional One and Le Bonheur Children's Hospital in Memphis provide opportunities for coordination between hospital interventions and other areas of focused deterrence. Through GVIP, interventionists engage with gun violence victims and their families in hospital settings to support recovery, prevent retaliation,

and ensure safety (City of Memphis, 2022). However, there is some question as to whether all participants are receiving all services requested.

## **Sustained Follow-Up: Reinforcing Accountability and Support**

The last step of focused deterrence is follow-up with high-risk individuals. Maintaining ongoing contact is crucial because it reinforces the message that law enforcement is closely monitoring their actions, serving as a continuous reminder of the consequences if they return to criminal activity (Scott, 2017). Regular engagement also reassures the community that authorities are genuinely invested in helping individuals change, rather than solely focused on punishment. This approach builds trust and demonstrates that the goal is to provide a way out of violence. Additionally, consistent follow-ups create opportunities to assess whether the strategy is effective; if not, adjustments can be made to improve interventions (Scott, 2017). Overall, checking in with both individuals and the community helps prevent recidivism by ensuring that those at risk have the necessary support.

### *Practices in Memphis*

Monitoring of compliance and accountability for continued violent behavior may not be as robust as it should be. Sustaining services requested is a challenge requiring a continual provision of resources.

## **Conclusion**

This review highlighted major components of focused deterrence. Ensuring strong sustainable relationships can provide successful outcomes. Effective focused deterrence requires identifying high-risk individuals; it depends on ongoing communication, strategic partnerships, and continuous evaluation. By connecting individuals to existing resources, such as job training, social services, and intervention programs, law enforcement and community leaders can offer real alternatives to violence. Regular follow-ups reinforce the consequences of continued criminal activity while also demonstrating a commitment to rehabilitation rather than just punishment. Additionally, collaborative approaches like street and hospital interventions ensure that support reaches individuals where they need it most. To

maximize impact, it is essential to continuously assess and refine these strategies, ensuring that all components— identification, notification, enforcement, support, and follow-up—work together effectively. Strengthening communication across agencies and enhancing existing resources will not only improve the success of focused deterrence but also foster long-term community trust and safety.

Our next publication on focused deterrence will provide a closer look at the identification of high-risk individuals.

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