

The Detroit One Violent Crime Reduction Initiative: How It Works and How Similar Programs May Benefit Your District

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2012 was not a kind year for the city of Detroit. Bankruptcy proceedings for the city were looming, its former mayor was on trial in federal court on racketeering charges, an interim police chief was in charge, and there was a real possibility that to satisfy debts the masterpieces in the Detroit Institute of Art would be sold. To make matters worse, 2012 saw the highest homicide rate the city had endured in twenty years. According to FBI and Detroit Police Department statistics, there were 386 homicides—a rate of 55 homicides per 100,000 residents. In addition, there were 1,263 non-fatal shootings in the city.

Days after the finalization of those numbers, the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan, Barbara McQuade, convened numerous law enforcement leaders from around the district and Michigan to discuss what to do about the untenable violence. These leaders included the SACs of FBI, ATF, DEA, HSI, IRS, U.S. Marshals, the Michigan High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Team (HIDTA), and Customs and Border Patrol, along with state and local leaders of the Michigan State Police, Detroit Police Department, the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office, Wayne County Sheriff's Department, Michigan Department of Corrections, Detroit Public School Police, the Mayor of the City of Detroit, and the Governor's Office. Her message was clear: Everyone was working hard, but in order to reduce this violence everyone would need to work both smarter and in better coordination. The leaders all concurred some re-thinking was required to address the gun violence.

Within her own office, U.S. Attorney McQuade challenged her team of prosecutors to study various violent crime reduction ideas in other cities in order to see which approaches might work in Detroit. She also asked them to re-evaluate their own internal processes in order to determine what changes they could make to change the dynamics of the situation. The team found a comparable model in Washington D.C.'s priority offender program, which focused on individuals who were driving violence within the city. After identifying those individuals, investigations would occur and then their cases tracked as they made their way through the criminal justice system. The District of Columbia had seen remarkable success with this model—dropping from 262 to 88 homicides over the decade between 2002 and 2012. Still, this process had to be modified for Detroit in order to accommodate the separation of state

and federal prosecutorial authority that the District of Columbia does not encounter and to weave in the federal law enforcement agencies' mission of longer-term gang investigations and disruption.

The ensuing re-evaluation and strategy going forward became known as the Detroit One Initiative (Initiative). The Initiative had three components: (1) identify and prosecute priority offenders; (2) dismantle violent gangs and criminal organizations; and (3) engage the community to act. As for the first component, priority offenders, known colloquially as "trigger pullers," were individuals who had committed, were committing, or were most likely to commit a crime while using or shooting a firearm. By working together and utilizing their combined intelligence to identify the most significant "trigger pullers," law enforcement agencies could efficiently allocate their time and resources to investigate some of the most dangerous individuals in the city.

In identifying the priority offenders, the Detroit law enforcement partners decided that it was important not to rely solely on prior criminal convictions since many violent offenders either fly under the radar or are younger without significant criminal history. While there were no firm criteria for identifying priority offenders, the Detroit One partners agreed to weigh the following factors: (1) prior arrests, including juvenile arrests; (2) documented firearms involvement; (3) numerous and recent violent crime arrests, convictions, and reports; and (4) reliable intelligence of criminal activity, such as information obtained from credible confidential sources. Utilizing this information, each federal agency and police precinct examined their areas of responsibility and identified individuals who were driving the violence. Then, analysts from each partner agency shared any intelligence they had on these individuals in a two-day meeting focused on discussing and narrowing their respective lists down to the top fifty priority offenders in the city.

To facilitate any investigation or prosecution of a priority offender, McQuade also assigned at least one and often times two AUSAs to each Detroit police precinct. These AUSAs' role was to act as a point of contact for the local police, to discuss arrests or investigations, to evaluate whether federal charges may be brought, and to convene meetings at the precinct with police and the federal law enforcement partners. The goal of the precinct team was to be able to answer three questions: (1) who are the three or four individuals driving the violence in our area right now; (2) what is the most violent gang in our area; and (3) what is the main drug block in our area. Once these questions were answered, the precinct team then developed strategies to address the identified drivers of violence in that particular area. As the Initiative developed, the partners learned that the best precinct teams met on a regular basis, usually monthly, to discuss the issues and individual priority offenders in their area. These regular meetings directly led to numerous successful prosecutions in both state and federal court, including felon in possession of a firearm, carjacking, narcotics, and robbery charges. Regular meetings also allowed for frequent updating of the priority offender list, as most individuals were arrested or removed from the list within six months.

Once a precinct team identified a problem group or area, they were able to maximize all of the resources of the various law enforcement agencies to combat that problem. For example, the Fourth Precinct identified a particular motel, the Victory Inn, as being a location that promoted narcotic sales, heroin overdoses, human trafficking, and was the locale for a number of shootings. The assigned AUSA was able to bring together HSI and the Detroit Police to work a joint investigation to dismantle the human trafficking and drug distribution conspiracy at the Victory Inn. Coordinating with the neighboring city's police, all three agencies conducted extensive surveillance in order to obtain a federal search warrant.

At the same time, the AUSAs directing the investigation brought in federal forfeiture attorneys and the City of Detroit legal department to shut down the business after the raid. On January 12, 2017, HSI and local police executed the search warrant for twenty-five rooms at the Victory Inn. During the execution, agents rescued fourteen lethargic female human trafficking victims who were suffering from drug withdrawal in disheveled rooms. They arrested two co-conspirators and recovered crack cocaine, one loaded firearm, narcotics paraphernalia, and dozens of cell phones. Later in January, a state court

judge ordered the Victory Inn to be shut down. Less than two months later, a federal grand jury charged six defendants in a nine-count human trafficking and drug distribution indictment. The investigation is still ongoing, and the IRS has joined the effort to follow the money trail.

The second component of the Initiative was identifying the gangs most responsible for the violence in the city. It was conventional wisdom within law enforcement circles that Detroit was not a “gang city,” meaning that the gangs were more neighborhood-based crews as compared to the traditional Blood or Crip sets found in Los Angeles or Chicago. This belief was so deeply rooted that law enforcement often failed to appreciate when gang activity caused or contributed to a particular shooting or homicide. However, the Initiative leaders, particularly the federal agencies, were interested in building larger gang cases that could be brought in federal court. Consequently, some re-thinking of the USAO’s approach was necessary.

First, U.S. Attorney McQuade asked her Violent and Organized Crime Unit (VOCU) and Drug Task Force attorneys to work with the federal agencies to identify the most violent gangs. This group identified eight gangs and one or two AUSAs were assigned to work these investigations. Then, the USAO asked the federal and local agencies to join forces and to work together on these investigations in order bring their respective resources and talents to bear and break down some of the barriers in communication that had existed between the federal and local agencies. These joint investigations had the added benefit of being able to seek OCDEF applications, thus adding Drug Task Force AUSAs into the mix in working these gang cases. Nor was U.S. Attorney McQuade hesitant to pair AUSAs from the General Crimes, National Security, White Collar, or Health Care Fraud Units with VOCU attorneys depending on the facts of the case. Finally, the USAO actively coordinated with the Organized Crime and Gang Section (OCGS) of the Criminal Division to strategize their gang prosecutions and to team with OCGS prosecutors as co-counsel on cases.

A prime example of the benefits of this aspect of the Initiative partnership was the multi-indictment prosecution of the violent Vice Lords street gang. The Vice Lords are a national gang engaged in a variety of crimes, including murder, robbery, narcotics trafficking, and witness intimidation. The Vice Lords’ leaders are located in both Chicago and Detroit, and the gang is broken down into various “branches,” including the Traveling Vice Lords, Insane Vice Lords, Conservative Vice Lords, and Mafia Insane Vice Lords. The Phantom Outlaw Motorcycle Club emerged out of the Vice Lords and has shared members and leaders in common with the gang.

Prior to the Initiative, ATF had begun investigating Vice Lord activity within Detroit but the investigation had not resulted in any significant charges. The ATF learned that there were high-ranking Vice Lord leaders, including the National President of the Phantom Outlaw Motorcycle Club, living in Michigan. However, the investigation had stalled due to a lack of cooperating witnesses and leads, and it was hampered by the mindset that Detroit was not a “gang city.” However, ATF, USAO, and OCGS agreed to a renewed focus and increased resources with the kickoff of the Initiative. The FBI was also invited to join the investigation; and within nine months after the Initiative began, the Vice Lords/Phantom Outlaw Motorcycle Club were charged in the city’s first street gang racketeering indictment in close to a decade.

Under the Initiative, federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies have worked together in the prosecution of the gang, which has led to the arrests and convictions of dozens of Vice Lords leaders and members over the last few years. The government’s indictments of the Vice Lords have taken whatever form the facts call for, including charging a single defendant with Hobbs Act robbery and firearms offenses or charging more than a dozen defendants with RICO conspiracy and VICAR offenses. The unifying thread was that each of these indictments have been part of the Initiative’s efforts to reduce violent crime in the city, whether that involves prosecuting a single individual or a dozen in order to dismantle this violent organization.

For instance, in a trial in August 2014, a jury convicted Christopher Tibbs, also known as “Chief Fatah,” the leader of the Mafia Insane Vice Lords branch for Michigan, of Hobbs Act robbery and an [18 U.S.C. § 924\(c\)](#) firearms offense relating to an armed robbery that Tibbs helped plan and “blessed” for the gang. The evidence showed that Tibbs recruited and used young adults and teenagers to commit crimes for the gang, and he ordered the murder of a witness in connection with this case. This case marked the first time that the federal criminal street gang enhancement ([18 U.S.C. § 521](#)) was charged in the Eastern District of Michigan. Because the jury found that Tibbs committed the crime to advance the criminal activities of his gang, the maximum penalty for aiding and abetting the robbery was increased from twenty to thirty years. In January 2015, Tibbs was sentenced to almost twenty-eight years in prison.

In two trials in March and May 2015, juries convicted eight leaders and members of the Phantoms, many of whom were also leaders and members of the Vice Lords, for various crimes, including a 2013 multi-state mass-murder plot against a rival organization and the shooting of a member of another rival organization. At trial, evidence showed that the Phantoms and Vice Lords were preparing for the first phase of the murder plot at the time search warrants were executed, including stockpiling firearms, hiring a thief to steal a van to be used in the murders, conducting research and surveillance of their intended victims, and assigning Phantom and Vice Lords members to stalk and murder the intended victims. The Phantoms’ and Vice Lords’ mass-murder plot was averted in large part by the quick action of Initiative partners, particularly through the efforts of ATF, FBI, and the Detroit Police Department.

Among those convicted was Antonio Johnson, also known as “MT” and “Mister Tony,” the National President of the Phantoms and the Three-Star General over all of the Vice Lords in Michigan. The evidence showed that Johnson used the Vice Lords to assist the Phantoms in various criminal endeavors, including to search for and violently attack rivals of the Phantoms. On September 8, 2015, Johnson was sentenced to thirty-five years in prison for RICO conspiracy, VICAR murder conspiracy, VICAR assault with a dangerous weapon, and firearms offenses. Of that indictment, thirteen members and associates of the Phantoms and Vice Lords were convicted of racketeering offenses and firearms offenses, including one person who fired upon the ATF during the execution of a search warrant, and they received sentences ranging from eight years to as high as forty years in prison.

In another example of the Initiative’s collaborative efforts against the Vice Lords, Initiative partners arrested and prosecuted nine members of the Traveling Vice Lords branch in 2015 and 2016 for the May 7, 2015, non-fatal shooting of a family of four with an AK-47, which was committed in part because two of the family members attempted to leave the gang. Those nine defendants pleaded guilty to RICO conspiracy, VICAR offenses, and firearms offenses, and they received sentences as high as twenty years in prison. In 2016, Initiative partners also arrested and prosecuted an associate of the gang, who was sentenced to four years in prison for witness tampering and HIPAA violations. He misused his position as an employee of a Detroit medical facility to access the facility’s private medical database to search for victims of the gang’s May 7, 2015, shooting and their family members. Knowing that his brother in the gang wanted this information to locate these relatives and prevent them from cooperating in the investigation and prosecution of the shooting, he provided information about those individuals, including their addresses, to his brother. In total, thirty-one Vice Lord members have been convicted as part of the Initiative.

The Initiative has not been solely focused on the Vice Lords. In re-thinking its approach to gang violence, the USAO decided that a few guiding principles were necessary: (1) begin again to utilize RICO conspiracy and VICAR charges to address gang violence; (2) act quickly to put an end to violence by identifying and charging gang leaders or “trigger pullers” to get them off the streets as quickly as possible, usually through a variety of charges, such as narcotics or felon in possession as the larger enterprise case is built; and (3) size of the gang does not matter—indicting five neighborhood clique members who are shooters for RICO can be just as effective as a forty person takedown. Since 2013, the following gang members have been investigated and charged:

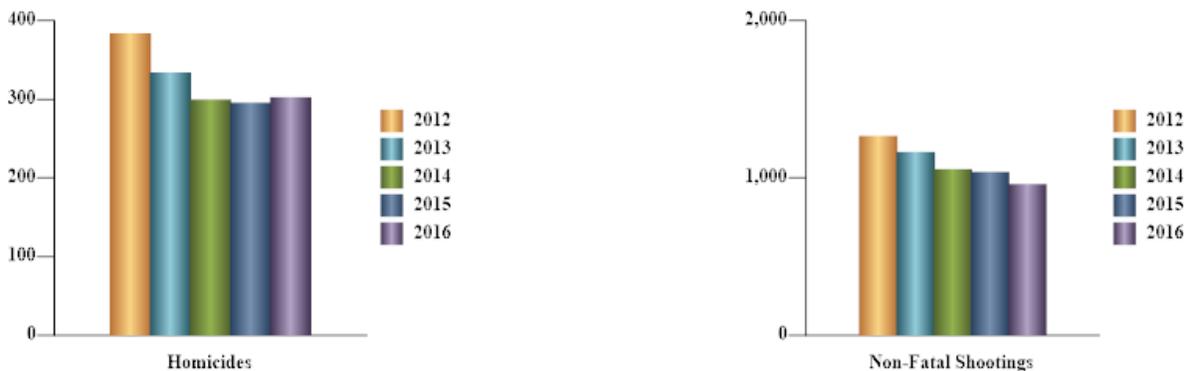
- Eighteen members of the Seven Mile Blood street gang for federal racketeering conspiracy and other violent acts in furtherance of racketeering;
- Nine members of the Bounty Hunter Bloods street gang for federal racketeering conspiracy and other violent acts in furtherance of racketeering;
- Fourteen members of the Rollin' 60s Crips street gang for federal racketeering conspiracy and other violent acts in furtherance of racketeering;
- Thirteen members of the Latin Counts street gang for federal racketeering conspiracy and other violent acts in furtherance of racketeering;
- Three members of the Band Crew street gang charged under the state of Michigan gang felony statute for violent acts in furtherance of their gang activities, and eight members of the Band Crew for federal racketeering conspiracy and other violent acts in furtherance of racketeering;
- Ten members of the RTM street gang for federal racketeering conspiracy and other violent acts in furtherance of racketeering;
- Four members of the Band Gang street gang charged under the state of Michigan gang felony statute for conspiracy to commit murder and assaults with intent to commit murder, and eleven members/associates of Bang Gang in federal court for access device fraud, aggravated identity theft, firearms, and obstruction of justice;
- Five members of the YNS street gang for federal racketeering conspiracy and other violent acts in furtherance of racketeering;
- Three members of the A1Killers street gang for federal narcotics offenses;
- Eleven members of the 6Mile Chedda Grove street gang for federal racketeering conspiracy and other violent acts in furtherance of racketeering;
- Twenty-four individuals on drug conspiracy charges for their use of sixteen different houses an eastside neighborhood of Detroit, many of them abandoned homes, for distributing heroin, cocaine, and crack cocaine between 2013 and 2015; and
- Fourteen individuals on criminal enterprise, drug distribution, or weapons offense for drug distribution in a west side neighborhood of Detroit.

OCGS has been a vital partner in this fight against gang activity within the city. In addition to all of the RICO reviews, OCGS has sent its prosecutors to join the prosecution teams on cases as large as a national gang like the Vice Lords or as small as a neighborhood clique like the Band Crew.

The final component of the Initiative strategy was community outreach and involvement. The law enforcement leaders recognized that any policing strategy must be coupled with buy-in from the community, especially when pushing back against the prevalent “no-snitch” culture that existed in Detroit. Consequently, the leaders invited community partners from the faith, business, education, and non-profit communities to assemble and discuss from their perspectives how violence could be reduced in the city and how to encourage citizens to report crime. This police-community partnership led to a variety of anti-violence events, including a rap contest for high school kids and a perennial cottage garden planting in memory of crime victims. Additionally, by having AUSAs assigned to each police precinct, they became spokespersons within the community by attending block club meetings or other community events to speak on safety and security within the neighborhoods. Finally, the Initiative’s focus on gangs dovetailed with the city’s use of the Ceasefire model—a program that recruits community involvement to deliver a positive, yet stern, message to gang members to leave behind the gang life and to stop the shootings or face significant consequences from themselves personally and their gang.

The Initiative results have been significant. In 2014 and 2015, homicides were under 300 for the first time since 1967. Comparing the four years of the Initiative to the preceding four years, there was an overall decrease of 166 homicides in the city. Moreover, the combined totals of homicides and non-fatal shootings have dropped from 1,649 in 2012 to 1,259 in 2016, a twenty-four percent drop over the four years.

Shootings Per Year in Detroit



Moreover, the side benefit of the increased cooperation, coordination, and trust between the law enforcement agencies is readily apparent. Representatives from the USAO, DEA, FBI, ATF, DPD, Marshals, Customs and Border Patrol, Detroit Police, Michigan State Police, and Wayne County Sheriff meet every week to discuss the Detroit One priority offenders and the progress of various gang prosecutions. These meetings ensure a unity of purpose and common action not previously seen in Detroit.

However, the success of the Initiative is not limited to the particular circumstances of Detroit. The takeaways that can be applied elsewhere seem basic, but can sometimes be forgotten while handling our busy law enforcement dockets.

- **Coordination**—Establish regular meetings with the various law enforcement entities within your district. Oftentimes each agency or law enforcement entity gets “tunnel vision” on its own mission. The USAO can play a powerful role as convener and coordination hub within a district. Moreover, the USAO can tap into resources from Main Justice, such as OCGS, to bring subject matter expertise and additional prosecutors in to help in a particular locale.
- **Planning**—Establish an over-arching strategy that all of the partner agencies agree to work towards. Dwight Eisenhower once said, “Plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” Everyone knows that even the best-laid plan needs to be changed almost immediately after it is put into actual use. But the process of planning—including everyone in the discussion, formulating a common goal and path forward, and agreeing to act accordingly—is invaluable. Going through a process where a district-wide strategy is agreed upon is valuable in both keeping everyone focused and resolving any disputes that arise between agencies.
- **Cooperation**—Focus on cooperation and resolve to spend less time on inter- and intra-agency disputes. By maximizing the strengths of the various agencies and coupling them with experienced AUSAs from across the various sections within the USAO, as well as OCGS trial

attorneys, Detroit has been able to identify, charge, and prosecute numerous gangs and cliques that what would not have been possible without this cooperation.

- Community involvement—Any successful law enforcement initiative begins and ends with community trust. Assigning AUSAs specific neighborhoods or precincts builds relationships and trust.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

❑ **Christopher Graveline** joined the Department of Justice, Criminal Division in 2007 with the Domestic Security Section (now the Human Rights and Special Prosecution Section) and has been at the U.S. Attorney’s Office—Eastern District of Michigan since 2009. Within his time at the USAO—EDMI, Chris has prosecuted numerous gangs and large-scale drug trafficking conspiracies. He has held the position of Deputy Chief of the Drug Task Force and is currently the Chief of the Violent and Organized Crime Unit.

❑ **Joseph Wheatley** joined the Criminal Division of the U.S. Department of Justice in 2005 through the Attorney General's Honors Program. He started as a Trial Attorney in the Organized Crime and Racketeering Section, now the Organized Crime and Gang Section, where he has prosecuted a variety of criminal groups, including MS-13, the Vice Lords, the Phantom Outlaw Motorcycle Club, La Cosa Nostra, and Eurasian organized crime. His work on the prosecutions of the Vice Lords and Phantom Outlaw Motorcycle Club in Detroit, from 2013 through the present, has been in support of the Detroit One Violent Crime Reduction Initiative.