



National Case Closed Project:

Event Summary of the National Case Closed Project's 2023 Convening on Practices for Effectively Investigating Fatal and Non-fatal Shootings

On September 25 and 26, 2023, the Bureau of Justice Assistance-funded National Case Closed Project (NCCP) held its first national convening to discuss best practices for responding to and investigating fatal and non-fatal shooting cases. Nearly 100 participants from 44 unique organizations representing law enforcement, crime analysis, forensic science, prosecution, victim advocates, community serving organizations, and other fields met over a 2-day period at RTI International's headquarters in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina.

The NCCP is a national program designed to support law enforcement agencies in improving their violent crime clearance rates, with an emphasis on fatal and non-fatal shooting cases. The project team conducts independent assessments for participating law enforcement agencies to identify effective and sustainable practices related to agency operations, agency resources, investigator capabilities, and community relations that the participating sites can implement to improve their clearance rates. Technical assistance and training resources are provided to support participating agencies and can be used by law enforcement agencies across the nation through the project's website and toolkit. Throughout the panels and discussions included in the 2023 NCCP convening, a number of key themes emerged, which are discussed below.



"It has just been phenomenal what they have been able to show us about our organization—how we can improve, what other agencies across the country are doing. It has just been phenomenal from my standpoint."

— John Thompson, Chief of Police,
Greensboro Police Department (NC)

Perspectives from Agency Leaders Participating in the NCCP

The NCCP convening covered multiple topics including a discussion of the challenges and progress made in addressing fatal and non-fatal shootings based on NCCP assessments conducted to date along with updates from agency leaders on steps taken toward implementing recommendations to improve agency shooting responses. Participants, including Chief John Thompson of Greensboro Police Department (NC) and Assistant Chief Rob Backus of Lansing Police Department (MI), shared their experiences with the NCCP including the benefits of having an objective, comprehensive assessment of the agency's investigative processes, the minimal effort required from agency staff, and how their police departments have worked to address the targeted recommendations for improvement. Both leaders included examples of how they have begun to implement NCCP recommendations, such as expanding the role of victim advocates in Greensboro and developing more comprehensive standard operating procedures in Lansing. Findings from the NCCP were described at times as being "brutal truths" that were important for the agencies to fully understand so that they could adequately address them.

"I've learned [here today] that there is a burning desire for law enforcement professionals to offer the best service that we can to our citizens. We all care about our communities; we have family members and loved ones that live in these communities that we serve. So today with the crowd and the diversity of people in the foreroom, it really inspires me, and I'm hopeful that we will be able to serve and protect the way the citizens expect us too."

— Stephanie Mardis, Assistant Chief of Police, Greensboro Police Department (NC)

Eliminating Communication Silos: The Integration of Support Units

The importance of establishing external and internal communication during fatal and non-fatal shooting investigations and eliminating communication silos was a key topic of discussion. Several participants spoke about the importance of creating a culture in which detectives can trust and rely on other units that can support the investigative process including patrol, victim advocacy, forensics, crime analysis, and other specialized units that may have access to useful information that can advance shooting investigations. Representatives from Fresno Police Department (CA) and Rochester Police Department (NY) explained how they have successfully encouraged investigators to involve patrol officers in investigations and the value they have seen from those efforts. A weekly violent crime meeting attended by all personnel involved with violent crime efforts was also proposed as a means of improving internal coordination and alignment between investigators and support units. For external communication, participants discussed how critical it is for community members to understand the effort and commitment that police invest in solving violent crime and the need to regularly update family members and the greater community on cold cases. Some had seen positive results from door-to-door engagement and walk and talks firsthand, such as receiving leads on cases, even from individuals actively involved

in crime. A representative from the Sacramento Police Department discussed how its multi-session citizen's academy has been effective at explaining the intricacies of policing to community members and obtaining citizen feedback. The potential value of these academies was supported by an attendee who had lost a loved one to gun violence and who explained that communities need education about policing in a way that counters what is shown in the media, including the criminal investigation process and how to file a complaint.

Applying What Works to Non-fatal Shooting Cases

A major topic of the convening was improving police department responses to non-fatal shootings. John Skaggs, a former homicide investigator who has conducted dozens of assessments of police departments' responses to shootings, explained that most departments are generally doing a good job of investigating homicides but that he has yet to find a department that does a great job of responding to non-fatal shootings. This is largely due to high rates of shootings, a lack of staffing capacity to effectively respond to each shooting, and the inability of investigators to focus solely on shooting investigations. He shared findings from NCCP assessments that many detectives who investigate non-fatal shootings are inexperienced, do not share information effectively, and do not rely on support units to the extent necessary. Sergeant Josh May from the Chattanooga Police Department's (TN) Gun Team explained how collaboration has been key to the success of the unit, including relying on information sharing and resources available with the department's crime gun intelligence center. A representative from Nashville Police Department (TN), a department that cleared about 40% of its non-fatal shootings in 2022, agreed about the importance of utilizing every relevant unit during shooting investigations, including narcotics officers and crime gun intelligence centers. Dr. Tom Scott discussed the importance of triaging non-fatal shootings given the high shooting volumes and large staff shortages in police departments across the country and discussed work the NCCP was doing to support law enforcement agencies with case triage.

“Today was such an eye opener. And I wish all survivors could be here to see today. To see law enforcement and RTI really working to help solve and close cases. I know I talk to so many survivors and collect their stories and if they could just see how much you all care, it would make such a difference.”

— Debra Gillispie, Founder, Mothers Against Gun Violence, Milwaukee, WI

Strategies for Building Ties with Victims and Witnesses

Participants discussed the value of law enforcement having a comprehensive and honest understanding of current and potential partnerships in the community, including the importance of investing in proactive and sustainable relationships. One example of this includes former Detective John Skaggs, who discussed the importance of building and maintaining relationships with community residents, including the families of shooting victims. Detective Skaggs highlighted the value of having speedy, in-person contact with witnesses and ensuring that both patrol officers and investigators receive additional training on how to effectively communicate with and interview victims and witnesses. In addition, law enforcement and community-based attendees spoke of the critical role victim advocates can play in supporting victims and their families. Mary Nero, a homicide victim advocate with the Greensboro Police Department, explained how it can help for advocates to have a background in law enforcement so they can communicate victim needs to detectives in a language police officers understand and can also help translate language and concepts used by law enforcement to victims. Based on conversations from this convening, the importance of law enforcement having sustained communication with the family members of homicide victims, as well as non-fatal shooting victims, cannot be overstated.

Incorporating Data and Intelligence Early in the Investigative Process

Another key theme that emerged was the importance of incorporating data and intelligence early on in the investigative process, including steps that can be taken to properly document information in a shareable format and strategies for information sharing within and between agencies. Shell casings, video footage, social media information, forensic evidence including DNA, and the vehicles and acquaintances connected to potential suspects are all types of data that when collected, analyzed, and incorporated into investigations can increase the likelihood that a violent crime is solved. Participants explained that to obtain and use this data, there must be communication and coordination between detectives and internal and external partners including crime and intelligence analysts, forensic scientists, and victims' family members. Representatives from Miami-Dade Police Department demonstrated the value of establishing data management systems that allow investigators to compile intelligence from multiple sources and having mechanisms to share this information across the department and with external partners, such as neighboring law enforcement agencies, in a timely manner. Representatives from Milwaukee Police Department highlighted the success of the department's Public Safety Review Meetings, which are attended by members of the agency and external partners such as prosecutors and members of the community, for promoting information sharing on current cases.

Leveraging Technology

The importance of technology in shooting investigations was another important topic of discussion. Several areas to highlight are (1) developing effective resources within the agency (or outside of it) to handle key areas of technical capacity including staff with the expertise to handle digital/cell phone processing needs as well as effective case processing to ensure they are able to prioritize and focus their time on the greatest needs; (2) ensuring that agency policy and internal practices are in place so that the technology-based resources and staffing are used consistently across shooting cases (and not only when an investigator determines they are needed); and (3) addressing

agency needs concerning software and training for staff. Multiple participants discussed the value of entering crime gun evidence into the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network and using cameras and processing audiovisual evidence to aid investigations. One of the presenters, Yaneisy Delgado, an intelligence analyst at the Miami-Dade Police Department, discussed how she has worked closely with investigators to understand what products and information are useful to them and uses multiple databases and software to create intelligence products that aid investigations. Miami-Dade also has one of the only labs with a Forensic Intelligence Unit, which the chief of its Forensic Services Division, Stephanie Stoiloff, called a hugely successful program.

Taking Steps to Build Trust and Legitimacy with the Community

Community engagement and building community relationships was another major theme that emerged throughout the convening. Participants emphasized the importance of engaging in face-to-face interactions with members of the community and regularly updating victims' families about the status of investigations. Several attendees with lived

experience spoke about their positive interactions with law enforcement, and participants offered strategies for improving community outreach, including providing regular updates on cold cases so the community knows their losses are important to law enforcement and attending community meetings. Presenters also emphasized the positive impact that maintaining community relationships can have on witness cooperation during shooting investigations. One presenter, Detective Skaggs, discussed the value that building friendships with the family members of murder victims has had not only for solving their cases but also for other murder cases in their neighborhoods as they continue to share information and improve resident perceptions of investigators. Victim advocates can play an important role in building trust and strong ties with the community by increasing advocacy support as part of the agency's response. This could increase a law enforcement agency's ability to (1) provide a single point of contact for updating victims or families on the status of cases (including cold cases); (2) stay in contact with family member's including on milestone dates such as a loved one's death; and (3) coordinate to take appropriate actions to clean up crime scenes, especially those located in public spaces.



Steps for Engaging Prosecution Partners to Solve Shootings Cases

Participants spoke about the importance of building relationships both between detectives and prosecutors and at an organizational or unit level. One attendee highlighted how crucial it is to continually reinvest in the building and strengthening of these relationships between law enforcement and prosecution due to regular staff turnover. As part of this effort, regular joint trainings and routine meetings such as monthly leadership meetings and biweekly gun crime reviews that include full participation from prosecutors were highly recommended. Another recommended process that came from the convening was obtaining prosecutor input on the development of an investigative checklist that would define the information needed by prosecutors' offices to move shootings cases forward.

Concluding Thoughts

The first NCCP convening was a thought-provoking, educational event where investigators, police leadership, crime and intelligence analysts, community members, prosecutors, researchers, and others shared their perspectives on how to successfully respond to shootings and improve shooting clearance rates and other outcomes that are important to community residents. A second NCCP convening will be held in spring 2025 that will build upon these themes and offer another opportunity to share information and increase the understanding of how to improve the law enforcement response to shootings.

"I've learned that what I saw as shortcomings in our fatal and non-fatal shootings [response] appears to be something that is [occurring] across the country. Agencies big and small are having to deal with the same issues. I've also learned that there are advantages to taking part in this program because it allows us to see ways that we can improve from some of those agencies as well. We are not in it alone. We are not the only one having to deal with the issues. And really being able to connect with other agencies and other partners I think makes it a little bit better for us."

— John Thompson, Chief of Police, Greensboro Police Department (NC)

More Information

If you have questions or want more information on the National Case Closed Project, please contact us.

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