

The Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission: An Interagency Collaborative Process to Reduce Homicide

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ABSTRACT

The Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission (MHRC) is a multi-level, multi-disciplinary, and multi-agency homicide review process aimed at reducing the occurrence of homicides in Milwaukee. Based on the public health approach to violence reduction, the MHRC has 3 goals: (1) to gain a better understanding of homicide through strategic problem analysis, (2) to develop innovative, effective responses, and (3) to focus limited enforcement and intervention activities on identifiable risks. The MHRC creates an environment for many disciplines and agencies to share information and work collectively on violence prevention strategies.

Since its inception, the MHRC has reviewed over 150 homicides and developed over 100 recommendations aimed at reducing homicide. These recommendations are based on themes that emerge from case reviews and focus on initiating change at system, agency/organization, and individual levels.

The MHRC has many accomplishments to date, including improved communication between local, state, and federal criminal justice agencies; assistance in immediate investigations; new strategic criminal justice activities; changes in ineffective agency practices; and new cooperative efforts between community service providers. Future plans include the continuation and expansion of initiatives including greater community impact and developing a Center of Excellence in community and public safety serving Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin.

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INTRODUCTION

Homicide is the leading cause of death among 15-24-year-old males in Milwaukee, and there are formidable race and gender disparities in occurrence. For example, the firearm homicide rate among black males between the ages of 15-24 is 170.44 versus 30.3 for white males of the same age, a total almost 6 times higher.¹⁻³ It is a public health problem that affects not only the safety and well-being of the citizens, but the economic vitality of the city as well. In 2004, leaders in Milwaukee including the mayor, police chief, assistant US attorney and district attorney assembled a working team of professionals charged with reducing homicide in Milwaukee through the development of a homicide review process. Their efforts led to the formation of the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission (MHRC) in January 2005 with funds awarded by the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, Wisconsin Partnership Fund for a Healthy Future, Project Safe Neighborhoods, and Violence Against Women Act.

Through strategic planning meetings with key leaders in law enforcement agencies, community service agencies and various academic disciplines, a review process was established unique to any other in the country. The MHRC, a large group of members from local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies; community-based organizations; and academic institutions has been meeting monthly to examine homicides and shootings in the city. The MHRC approaches violence from a public health perspective, which is geared toward prevention and improving the health and safety of the population as a whole. By bringing together people from different organizations and academic disciplines to identify causes and consequences of violence in our community, we are in a better position to improve ineffective agency practices, implement new legislation, and develop and evaluate data-driven violence prevention initiatives.

Table 1. Summary of the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission 4-Level Approach to Homicide Review

Level	Focus
I	Day-to-day patrol, investigation, and apprehension of suspects by the Milwaukee Police Department. Project Ujima staff contact the victim's family, identify their social, emotional, and financial needs, and coordinate services.
II	Criminal justice professionals meet monthly to share homicide information. Members identify how each homicide could have been prevented, identify trends, and make recommendations on improving current agency practices and developing innovative violence prevention responses.
III	Community service providers meet bimonthly to share information on homicides cleared by arrest. Members identify how each homicide could have been prevented, how community factors contributed to the homicide, and make recommendations for targeted intervention programs.
IV	Community members attend semi-annual community meetings to learn information coming from the reviews. Members add additional information on homicides, respond to proposed and enacted violence prevention efforts, and make recommendation for further prevention efforts.

The goals of the MHRC are 3-fold: (1) to gain a better understanding of the nature of homicide through strategic problem analysis, (2) to develop innovative responses to the problem of homicide, and (3) to focus limited enforcement and intervention activities on identifiable risks.

METHODS

To ensure a thorough and complete case review of each homicide in this new initiative and to allow for later evaluation of MHRC efficacy, the MHRC chose to initially focus on 3 of the 7 police districts: Districts 2 and 6 on the south side, and District 5 on the north side. Review meetings began in May 2005 with a retrospective review of homicides that occurred in 2004 in Districts 2, 6, and 5. This served as a pilot for testing a meeting format, determining who was missing from the table, and establishing expectations of the members.

There are multiple levels in the MHRC process. Please see Table 1 for a summary of the MHRC 4-level approach for homicide review. At *Level I*, shortly after an investigation begins, a referral of the homicide victim's family is made by the MHRC staff to Project Ujima, a victim services agency located at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin. Project Ujima offers a no-cost

assessment of financial, mental health, and spiritual needs and either provides the services directly or makes an appropriate referral.

The homicides are then reviewed at *Level II* by local, state, and federal criminal justice agencies at a monthly meeting. Case-specific circumstances, victim and suspect criminal history, probation or parole performance, history of police calls to involved properties, gun trace data, and gang affiliations are discussed, new leads are generated in open cases, and missed opportunities for prevention are identified. The focus of the meeting is on prevention and identifying insufficiencies in criminal justice systems. The Level II members make recommendations on how to address those problems.

A community service provider review team represents MHRC's *Level III*. Select social service providers and law enforcement personnel working in a community liaison capacity meet bimonthly to review closed homicides and select shootings (not under investigation). The focus of this level of review is also on prevention. Community service providers bring their knowledge of persons and places involved in the homicides and offer their ideas on methods of prevention. A confidentiality agreement is signed by all participating individuals prior to each meeting. See Appendix 1 on-line at www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org/_WMS/publications/wmj/issues/wmj_v106n7/1067-obrien_wms.pdf for a list of participating criminal justice and community service agencies.

Finally, the general public is invited to *Level IV*, semiannual meetings during which information learned from Levels II and III is shared. Smaller groups are formed and facilitated by members of Levels II and III. Community residents offer their ideas on how to address homicide in the community and have an opportunity to comment on proposed or already implemented homicide reduction initiatives and make their own recommendations for violence reduction. Two such meetings have occurred, the first located on the near north side of Milwaukee on March 30, 2006. The second Level IV meeting was held on Milwaukee's south side on October 5, 2006.

The recommendations generated by the 4 levels of the MHRC are then taken to the *Working Group*, a small group of individuals involved in the review process who have higher levels of authority within their community agencies and/or academic institution. This group determines the feasibility of each recommendation and whether they are amenable to implementation.

The Working Group then sends the approved recommendations to the *Executive Committee*, a group

of agency administrators who are able to take the recommendations and implement them within their own agencies.

RESULTS

In the past 2.5 years, criminal justice agencies and community-based organizations have benefited from an increase in communication and improved relationships. Their exchange of information on homicide victims, suspects, witnesses, and locations has assisted in immediate homicide investigations and refined the way criminal justice agencies do business. For many participants, this is their only opportunity to meet face-to-face.

Many recommendations made by the Commission have been implemented or are in process, and many have had an impact on how agencies address homicide or on homicide rates themselves.

In the summer of 2006, based on recommendations from the Commission, the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) ordered a directed patrol mission (DPM) to increase tavern checks on the most problematic taverns in each district when data analysis determined that 10% of homicides occurred in or directly outside a tavern. As a result, tavern-related shootings and homicides were dramatically reduced. Prior to the DPM, from January 1, 2006 to June 30, 2006, there were 7 homicide and 18 non-fatal shooting incidents (34 victims) occurring in and around taverns in the city of Milwaukee. After the DPM, between July 1, 2006 and December 31, 2006, that number fell to 1 homicide and 10 shooting incidents (13 victims) in the 6 participating police districts. That is a 60% decline in homicide and shootings incidents. In 2005, tavern-related incidents were normally distributed over the calendar year. An ordinance has also been proposed requiring digital video cameras in all taverns.

Other recommendations and associated impacts are listed in Table 2. They are only a sampling of some of the over 100 recommendations that have been made by the Commission. They address the need for improvement of agency practices, development of targeted violence reduction programs, and the modification of current or creation of new legislation.

The value of the MHRC to its members is evident in the continued high attendance at each law enforcement meeting and the expansion of the review process to include nonfatal shootings in 2006, Police District 3 in 2007, and a separate domestic violence-related homicide review team in 2007. In just 2.5 years, the MHRC has become well established in Milwaukee's criminal justice

Table 2. Summary of Select Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission Outcomes

Outcomes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Improved communication and information sharing between local, state, and federal criminal justice agencies led to the following outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duplication of efforts and potential investigative interference prevented when it was discovered that a local and federal law enforcement agency were both pursuing the same gang. Federal charges issued against at least 3 suspects as a result of the Assistant US Attorney attending the meetings. Method established for the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) to alert the State of Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC) Probation and Parole agents when police question or arrest a person under supervision. Lists of the most violent perpetrators in each police district provided by the Major Violators Program (MVP) to better inform officers about high-risk individuals in their area. MPD and the District Attorney's Office implemented a new standard operating procedure for follow-up on shooting cases. Due to insufficient evidence and uncooperative victims and witnesses, many shooting cases were not being charged. It was determined by the MHRC that several shooting/homicide incidents could have been prevented had a prior shooting been charged. The Wisconsin DOC improved information provided to judges at sentencing, with the belief that better criminal and social history information leads to more appropriate sentencing. More detailed criminal histories and prior performance on probation and parole have been added to the pre-sentence investigations (PSI) requested by the judiciary. In addition, a shorter, more user-friendly PSI form is being drafted with the assistance of the judiciary. There have also been discussions regarding a change in procedure requiring a PSI on all felony cases (currently PSIs are requested in only 18% of felony cases). Police officers in every district trained in the use of crime-mapping software to further inform policing efforts. Governor provided funding for DOC to place 13 new agents into the police district stations, allowing for closer supervision of the DOC clients at greatest risk for re-offense and for improved collaboration between agents and officers. The Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance provided funding for the development of a bilingual educational booklet on gangs for parents of school-aged children by the Milwaukee Public Schools Gang Intelligence Unit and the Milwaukee Police Department Intelligence Division.

community.

Finally, and most importantly, recent preliminary data suggest that the MHRC's work may be making a direct impact on homicide rates in certain districts. The Level II and III reviews began with a focus on homicides in Police Districts 2, 5, and 6. The number of homicides in these districts has declined 15% between 2004 (pre-MHRC) and 2006 (2 years into MHRC), compared to a 44% increase in homicide in the remaining districts.

DISCUSSION

A successful framework for the MHRC has been developed, barriers in implementation have been overcome, and the MHRC is accomplishing its goals. The MHRC is perceived by its members as an entity that can identify a need for system change, facilitate the development and implementation of an effective response, strengthen partnerships, and improve analytic capacity and information sharing between agencies.

Many of the recommendations of the MHRC have initially focused on the criminal justice system. With time, additional funding, and increased community participation, the MHRC will be able to implement more community-based recommendations.

Most importantly, preliminary data suggest that homicides are down in police districts involved in the MHRC reviews, but are up in the remaining 4 districts that are not involved. Taken together, in just 2.5 years, the MHRC has become well established and highly valued.

Addressing homicides and preventing their occurrence requires more than a criminal justice response. The roots of violence and homicide are multi-faceted, and producing the societal change needed to improve the health and safety of our community is an immense challenge requiring leaders in education, medicine, the faith community, criminal justice, and social services.

Short-term plans are to continue the current homicide review process at all 4 levels with particular focus on broader community involvement and impact, and expansion citywide by 2010. Longer-term plans are to develop and establish a Center of Excellence on Community and Public Safety in Milwaukee using the MHRC as its foundation. This Center will serve as a model clearinghouse for information sharing, community coalescence, and community-academic collaboration to bring about the societal changes necessary to reduce violent crime and homicide in Milwaukee and Wisconsin.

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