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PROJECT SAFE
NEIGHBORHOODS
NATIONAL EVALUATION

A National Portrait of Project Safe Neighborhoods Implementation

Introduction

Coordinated by the U.S. Attorneys' Offices (USAOs) in the 94 federal judicial districts, Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) is a nationwide initiative by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) that brings together federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement officials, prosecutors, community-based partners, and other stakeholders to identify the most pressing violent crime problems in a community and develop comprehensive solutions to address them. PSN grants are allocated to each of the federal districts, and PSN-related activities are customized to account for local variations in violent crime and resources. Every USAO has at least one PSN Coordinator who oversees PSN implementation and activities in the district.

Under a grant from the National Institute of Justice to conduct a national evaluation of PSN (Award No. 2019-75-CX-0008), RTI International and the Justice Research and Statistics Association interviewed PSN Coordinators, the people in the USAO responsible for leading PSN efforts, to gain insights into the design and implementation of PSN. The findings described in this report are based on interviews conducted from February to April 2022 with 91 PSN Coordinators across 88 federal districts.¹

This report presents findings related to key elements of PSN: leadership by the USAOs; PSN target areas and focal crimes; key elements, strategies, and approaches; and perceived challenges and accomplishments. The report discusses implications of the findings for key PSN stakeholder groups. Additional reports will describe findings from other aspects of the national evaluation.

¹ Three districts each had two PSN Coordinators in distinct geographical areas. As this report summarizes information provided about PSN in the federal districts, for the Coordinators in these three districts, the reference is to their respective areas within the districts. Project staff were unable to conduct interviews with the PSN Coordinators from six federal districts.

PSN is designed around the following key elements:

- Community engagement between and among law enforcement, prosecutors, community organizations, residents, and other stakeholders
- Prevention and intervention activities to prevent and reduce future violence
- Focused and strategic enforcement, including understanding the violent crime problem, leveraging technology and analytics, and implementing evidence-based enforcement strategies
- Accountability, including collecting and sharing intelligence and crime data and analyzing the impact of violence reduction approaches



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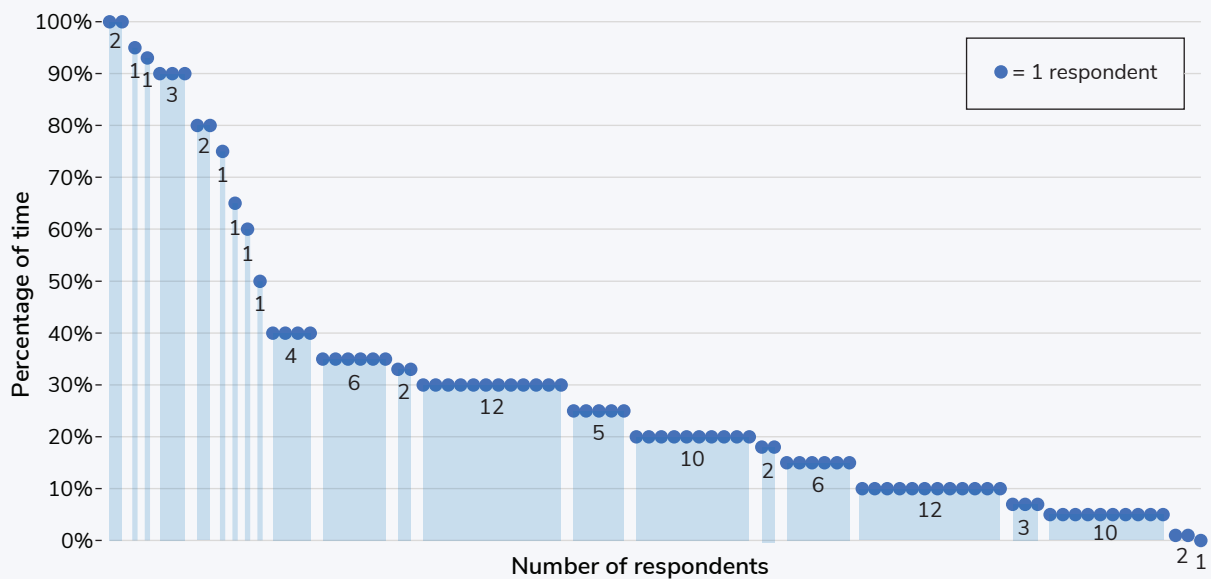
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Leadership by the USAOs

How do USAOs manage and lead PSN?

There is broad variability in how the USAOs manage and lead PSN in their districts. First, the amount of time PSN Coordinators dedicate to PSN-related activities (other than prosecuting cases) varies widely; see Figure 1. Some Coordinators (11%) reported spending at least 75% of their time on PSN activities, whereas 15% reported spending 5% or less of their time on PSN. The median percentage of time spent on PSN activities was 20% and the mean (influenced by a relatively few high percentages) was 29%.

Figure 1. Percentage of PSN Coordinator's Time Spent on PSN



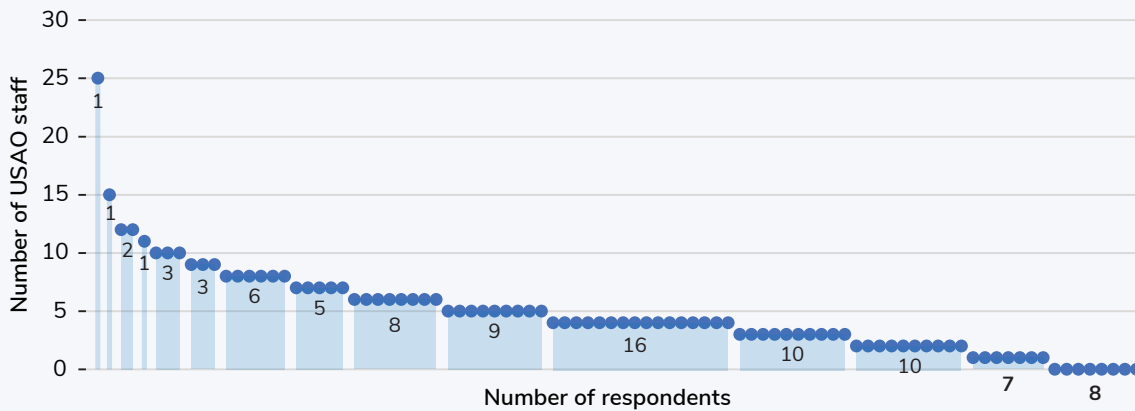
Mean = 29%; Median = 20%
n = 88

PSN Coordinator Turnover

At the time of the interviews, the median time that current PSN Coordinators had served in their position was 2.8 years, although 11% had been in their position for over 10 years. There was a relatively high level of turnover in the Coordinator position: 19% of Coordinators had been in the position less than 1 year and another 16% for 1–2 years.

Second, there are substantial differences in the number of USAO staff other than the PSN Coordinator who actively participate in PSN strategic planning, coordination, or oversight (again, excluding prosecution of cases). See Figure 2. Eight Coordinators (9%) reported that 10 or more other staff in their office were actively involved with PSN; conversely, another eight Coordinators said there were no other staff working on PSN. The median number of other USAO staff reported to be working on PSN was 4.0 and the mean was 4.8.

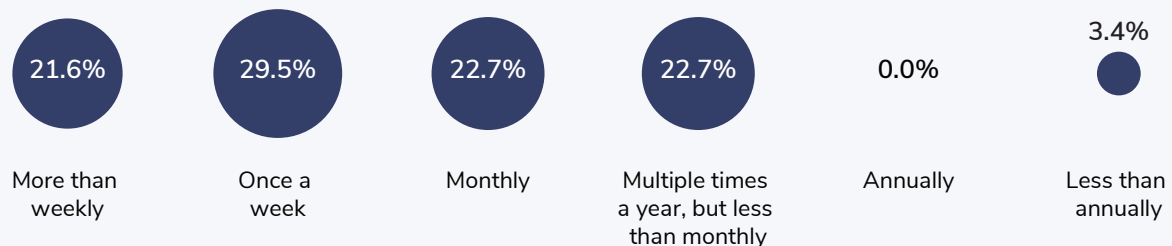
Figure 2. Number of Other USAO Staff That Work on PSN



Mean = 4.8; Median = 4.0
n = 90

There were also differences in Coordinator reports of how frequently the U.S. Attorney in the district is directly involved in PSN via task force meetings, community events, or other similar activities. See Figure 3. The most commonly reported frequency of U.S. Attorney involvement was once per week (29.5%). Slightly fewer Coordinators said their U.S. Attorney participated in PSN multiple times per week (21.6%), monthly (22.7%), or multiple times per year but less than monthly (22.7%). A few Coordinators (3.4%) said the U.S. Attorney participated less than once per year.

Figure 3. U.S. Attorney’s Personal Engagement in PSN Activities



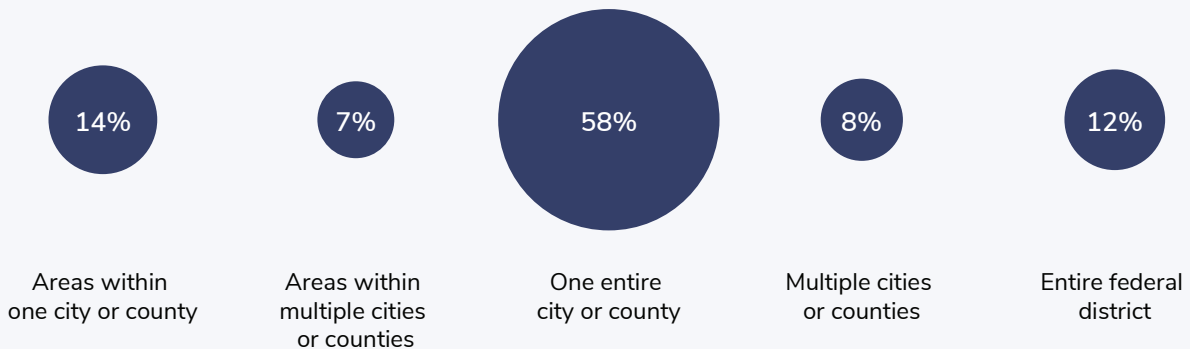
n = 88

Target Areas and Focal Crimes

In what types of geographic areas are PSN efforts focused?

More than half (58%) the districts focus their PSN efforts on one entire city or county (see Figure 4), typically selected for high rates of violent crime. Some districts' PSN areas are selected areas in a single city or county (14%) or in multiple cities or counties (7%). Conversely, 12% of districts extend their PSN efforts across the entire district and 8% cover multiple cities or counties, though not the entire federal district.

Figure 4. Types of PSN Areas



n = 91

Having a single PSN area was most common (reported by 30 respondents), followed by two areas (19 respondents) and three areas (14 respondents).

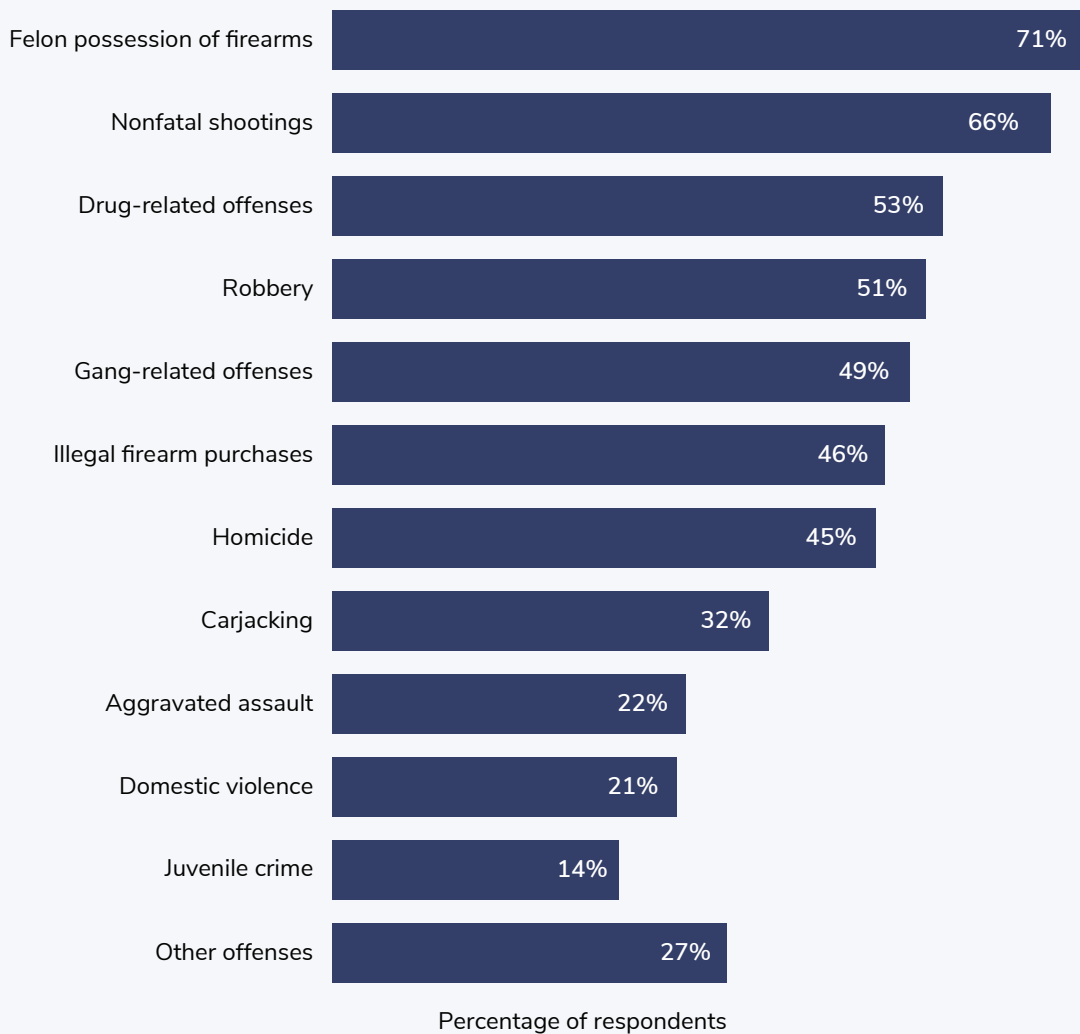
PSN Strategies and Resources Reflect Differences in Focal Areas

Each USAO considers its district's needs and resources in deciding how narrowly or broadly to focus PSN efforts. The implications of differences in PSN areas are especially striking when one considers the different challenges involved in focusing on a few high-crime neighborhoods in a single large city compared with, for example, covering an entire large and mostly rural state.

On what types of crime are PSN efforts focused?

The U.S. DOJ introduced PSN to combat violent crime but left it to individual districts to determine the most pressing types of violent crime that need to be addressed in their communities. When asked the types of crime that were the current focus of PSN activities in their districts, more than half the Coordinators said their districts focus their PSN efforts on cases involving a felon in possession of a firearm (71%), nonfatal shootings (66%), drug-related offenses (53%), and robbery (51%). Almost half reported a focus on gang-related offenses (49%), illegal firearm purchases (46%), and homicide (45%). See Figure 5.

Figure 5. Types of Crime That Are the Focus of PSN



n = 91

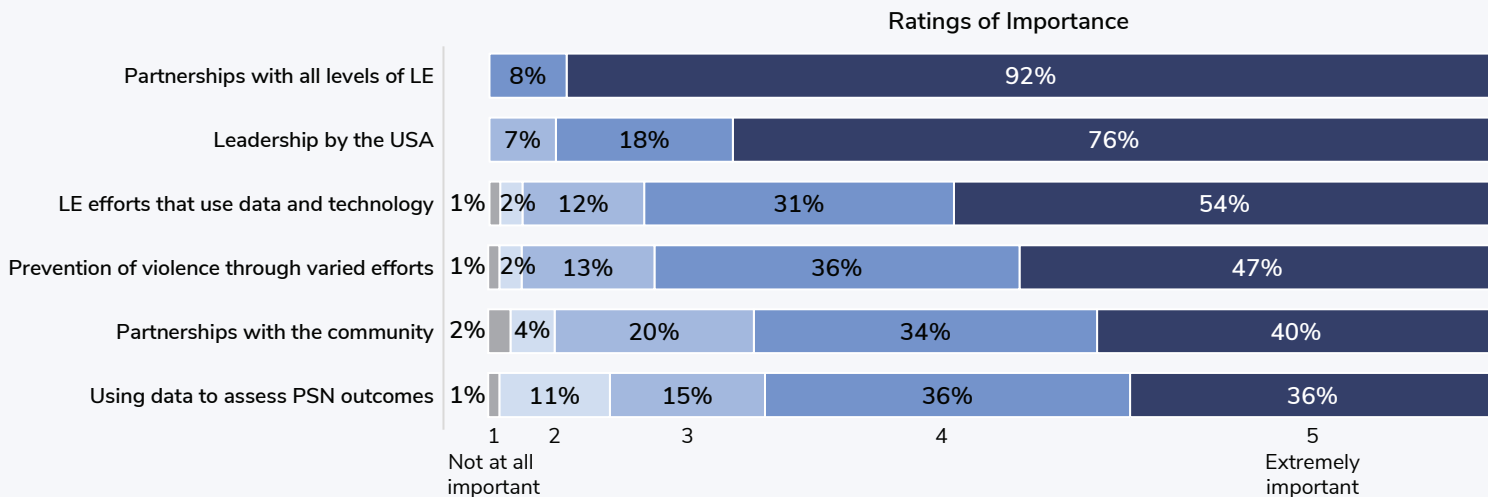
Key Elements of PSN

How are key PSN elements perceived in terms of importance and satisfaction with implementation progress?

Coordinators were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how important each of the following elements is to their district’s PSN strategy: (1) leadership by the U.S. Attorney, (2) partnerships with all levels of law enforcement, (3) partnerships with the community, (4) law enforcement efforts that use data and technology to focus on the most violent offenders or areas, (5) efforts to prevent additional violence, and (6) the use of data to assess PSN outcomes.² See Figure 6.

Partnerships with all levels of law enforcement received the highest average importance ratings, with 92% of Coordinators rating that element as a 5 on the 1–5 scale, that is, as “extremely important.” Leadership by the U.S. Attorney was also seen as highly important (76% gave a rating of 5 and 18% a rating of 4). Approximately half of respondents gave “extremely important” ratings to law enforcement efforts that use data and technology to identify the most violent offenders and areas (54% of respondents) and prevention of additional violence through varied efforts (47%). The elements least commonly rated as extremely important were using data to assess PSN outcomes (40% of respondents) and partnerships with the community (36%). Even for these latter two elements, more than 7 in 10 respondents gave ratings of either 4 or 5.

Figure 6. Importance of Key Elements of PSN in Districts



n = 91. LE, law enforcement; USA, U.S. Attorney.

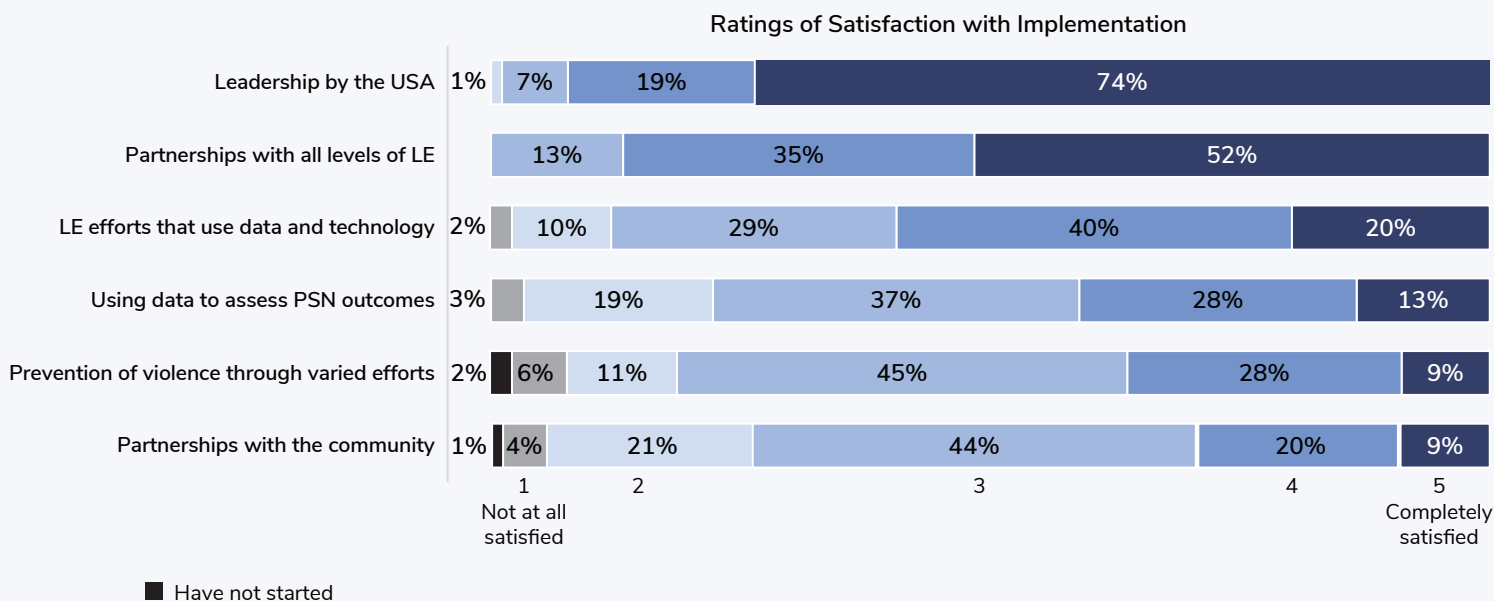
The PSN Model Extends Well Beyond Prosecuting Cases

A core mission of the USAOs is prosecuting criminal cases brought by the Federal government. PSN’s additional focus on preventing future violence, partnering with the community, and assessing changes in crime and other outcomes can require USAO staff to take on roles they are not used to filling. Some PSN Coordinators see these elements as less important to their districts’ PSN strategy.

² These elements were the key principles of the enhanced PSN strategy that were in place from October 2017 through May 2021, including when the Coordinator Interview protocol was being designed in early 2021. For clarity of discussion, interviewers asked separately about partnerships with all levels of law enforcement and with the community, which together comprised a single principle.

Coordinators were also asked how satisfied they were with their district’s implementation of each element, with 5 being “completely satisfied” and 1 being “not at all satisfied.”³ See Figure 7. Coordinators reported high levels of satisfaction with leadership by the U.S. Attorney (93% gave a rating of 4 or 5) and partnerships with all levels of law enforcement (87% gave a rating of 4 or 5). The elements for which Coordinators gave the lowest satisfaction ratings were partnerships with the community (37% gave a rating of 4 or 5) and prevention of violence through various efforts (29% gave a rating of 4 or 5).

Figure 7. PSN Coordinators’ Satisfaction With Implementation of Key Elements



n = 91. LE, law enforcement; USA, U.S. Attorney.

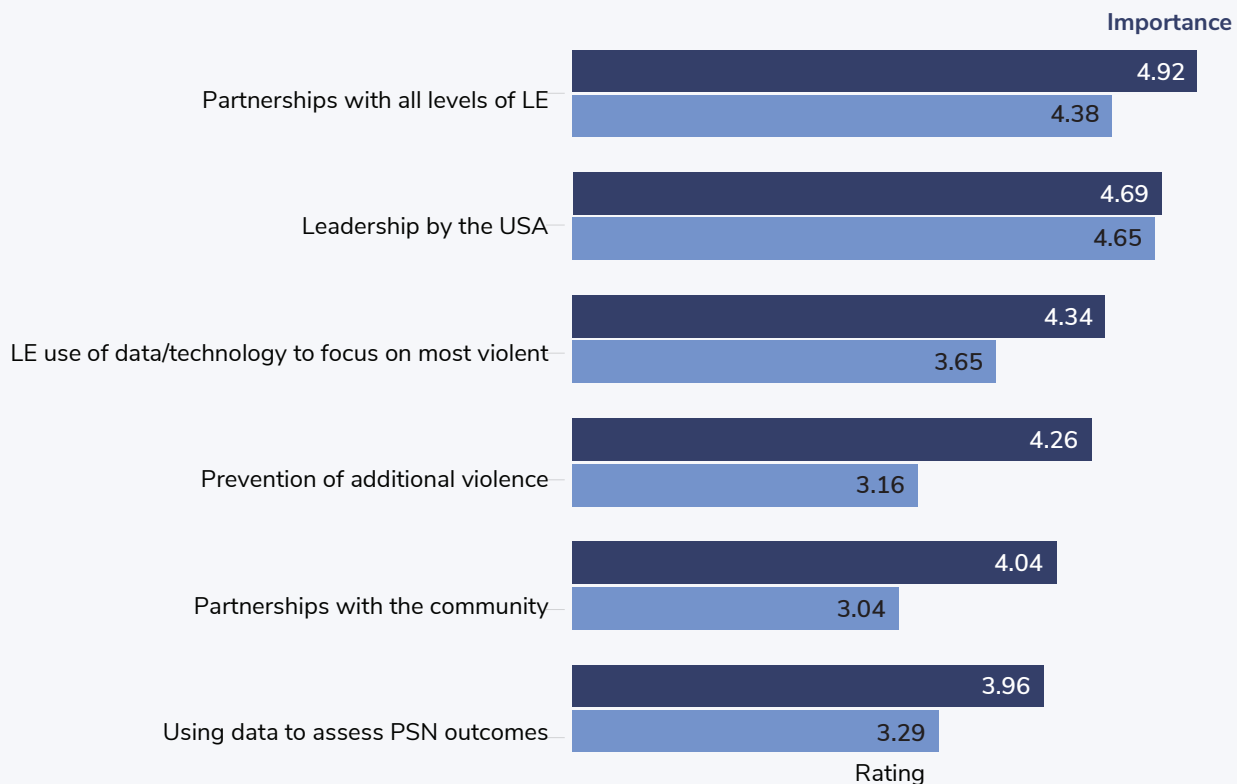
Satisfaction With Progress Is Higher for USAO Core Activities

Not surprisingly, PSN Coordinators are more satisfied with the progress made in implementing PSN elements that are closely aligned with the USAO core mission of prosecuting criminal cases. Many reported the need for additional progress in approaches less central to the USAO’s core mission and activities.

³ Respondents could also say that they had not yet started implementing the element; that response was very rare.

To assess the relationship between perceived importance and satisfaction with implementation, the ratings were coded on a 1-to-5 scale, with extremely important and completely satisfied coded as 5. As noted, partnerships with all levels of law enforcement and leadership by the U.S. Attorney were highly rated on both dimensions. For each of the other four elements, satisfaction with implementation was, on average, rated lower than perceived importance. See Figure 8.

Figure 8. Perceived Importance and Satisfaction With Implementation



n = 91. LE, law enforcement; USA, U.S. Attorney.

Perceived Importance Generally Exceeds Satisfaction With Progress

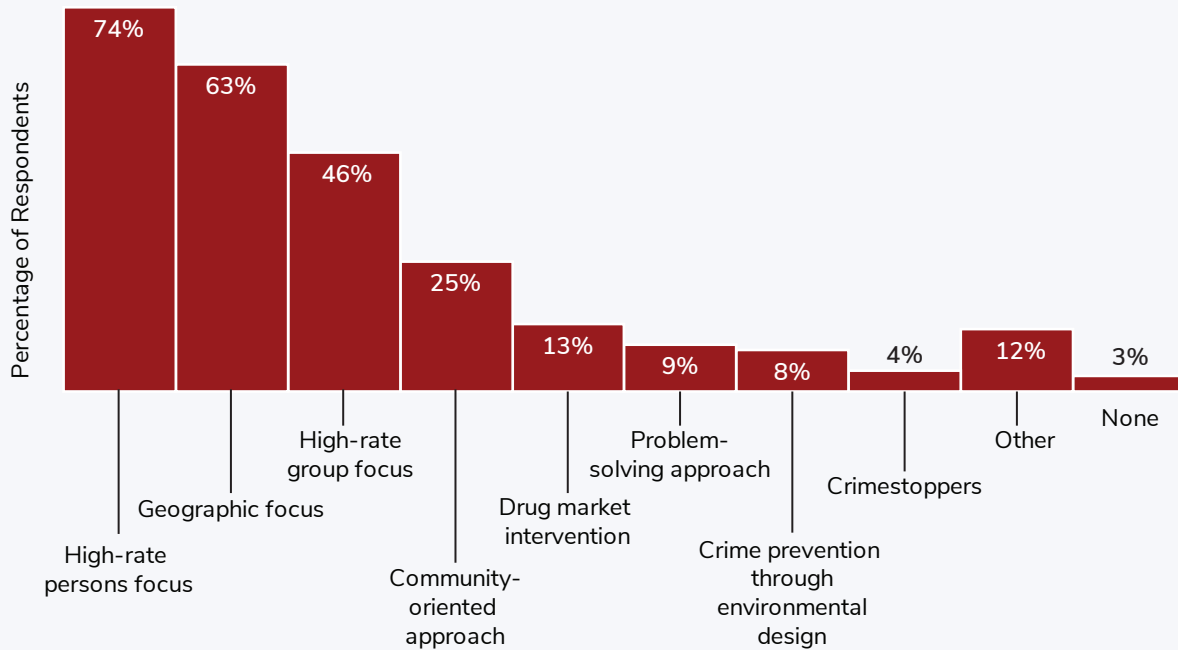
Coordinators reported greater satisfaction with progress on elements seen as most important to strategy. Many saw the need for additional progress in approaches rated as less important – though all elements were rated as at least moderately important.

Approaches, Strategies, and Data

Which law enforcement models guide PSN enforcement efforts?

In response to an open-ended question, Coordinators reported a wide variety of law enforcement models guiding PSN strategy. See Figure 9. The most common models include a focus on high-rate or chronic offenders, such as focused deterrence approaches (74%); a geographic focus, such as hot-spot policing (63%); and a high-rate group or gang focus, such as a “pulling levers” approach (46%). Most Coordinators reported multiple models guiding their PSN strategy.

Figure 9. Law Enforcement Models Guiding PSN Strategy



n = 91

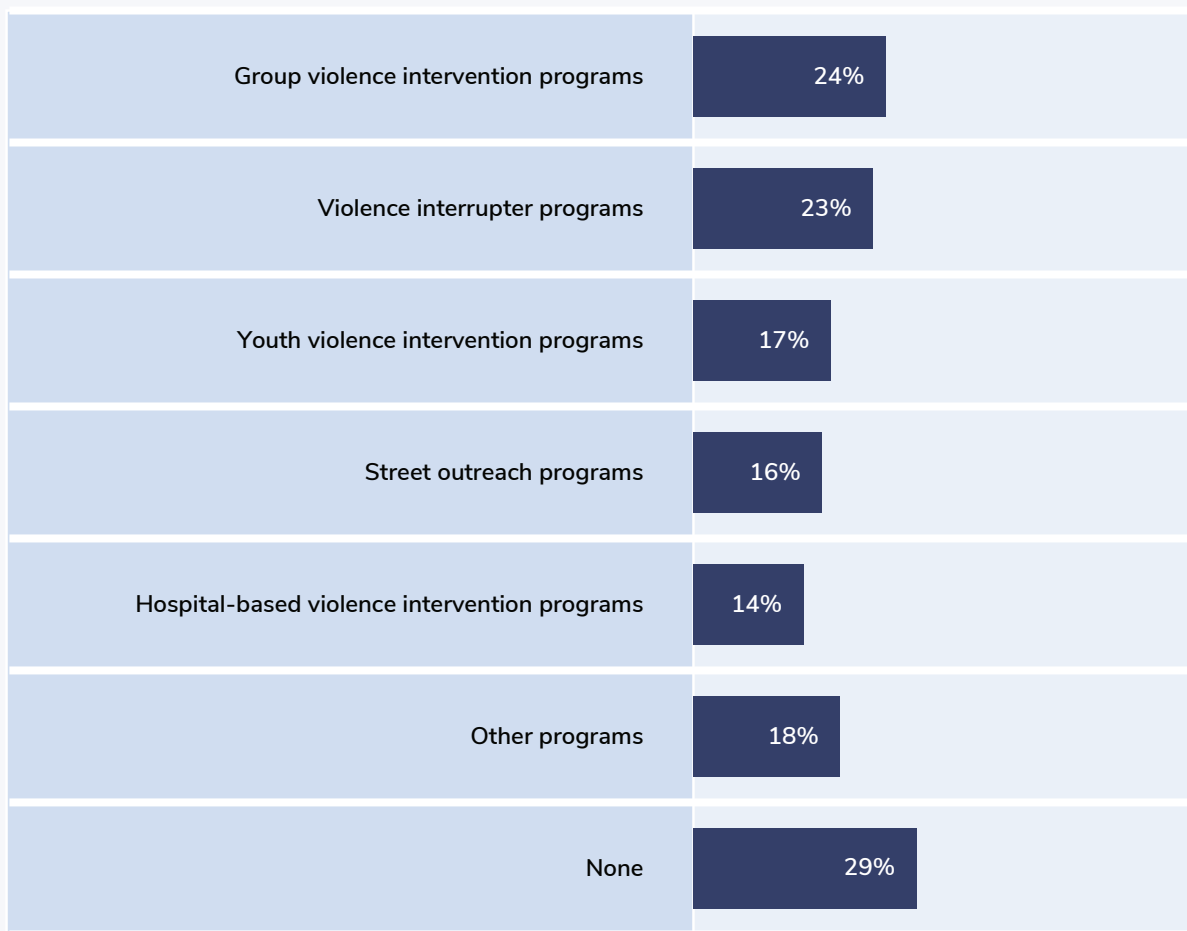
PSN Focuses on High-Violence Individuals and Areas

Many Coordinators described their PSN law enforcement models as targeting individuals responsible for committing a lot of violence, areas where a lot of violence takes place, or both. This focus reflects the PSN model’s joint emphasis on using technology and data-driven approaches (to identify the most violent offenders or areas) and partnering with local and federal law enforcement (to respond to and deter the violence).

What types of violence prevention and intervention strategies are used in PSN efforts?

Violence prevention and intervention strategies vary across districts. When asked what type of violence intervention strategies were used, Coordinators offered various answers. No single strategy was reported by more than a fourth of Coordinators, with group/gang violence intervention programs (24%) and violence interrupter programs (23%) the most commonly reported. See Figure 10.

Figure 10. Community Violence Intervention Strategies

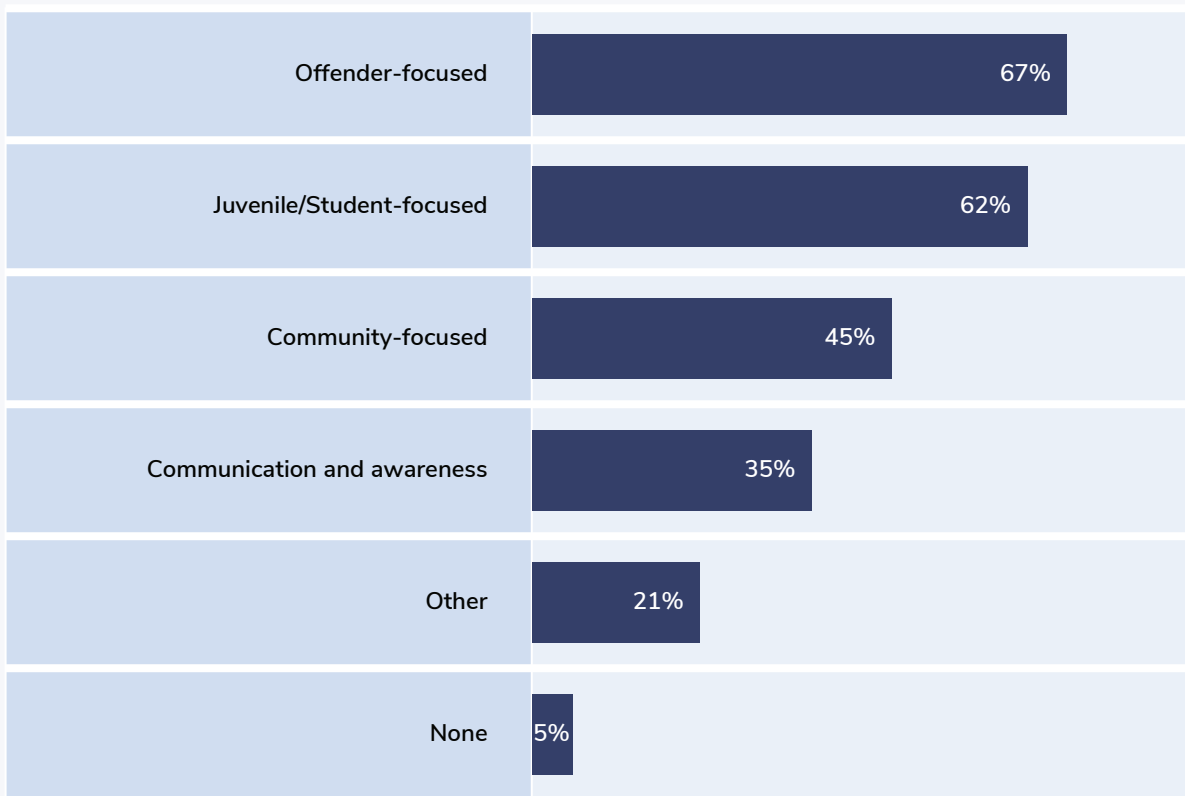


n = 86

Percentage of respondents

Coordinators were asked to name any violence prevention activities engaged in under PSN during the past 12 months; responses were grouped into four categories plus an “other” category (see Figure 11). The most commonly reported prevention activities were offender-focused programs (67%), such as reentry courts, offender notification meetings, and education or employment programs, and juvenile- or student-focused activities (62%), like school-based prevention programs and substance use prevention programs. Community-focused activities (45%), such as community meetings and neighborhood development programs, and communication and awareness activities (35%), such as public service announcements, outreach to vulnerable populations, and community crime awareness or education programs, were also common. Only 5% of Coordinators reported that their district’s PSN strategy does not include any violence prevention activities.

Figure 11. Violence Prevention Activities



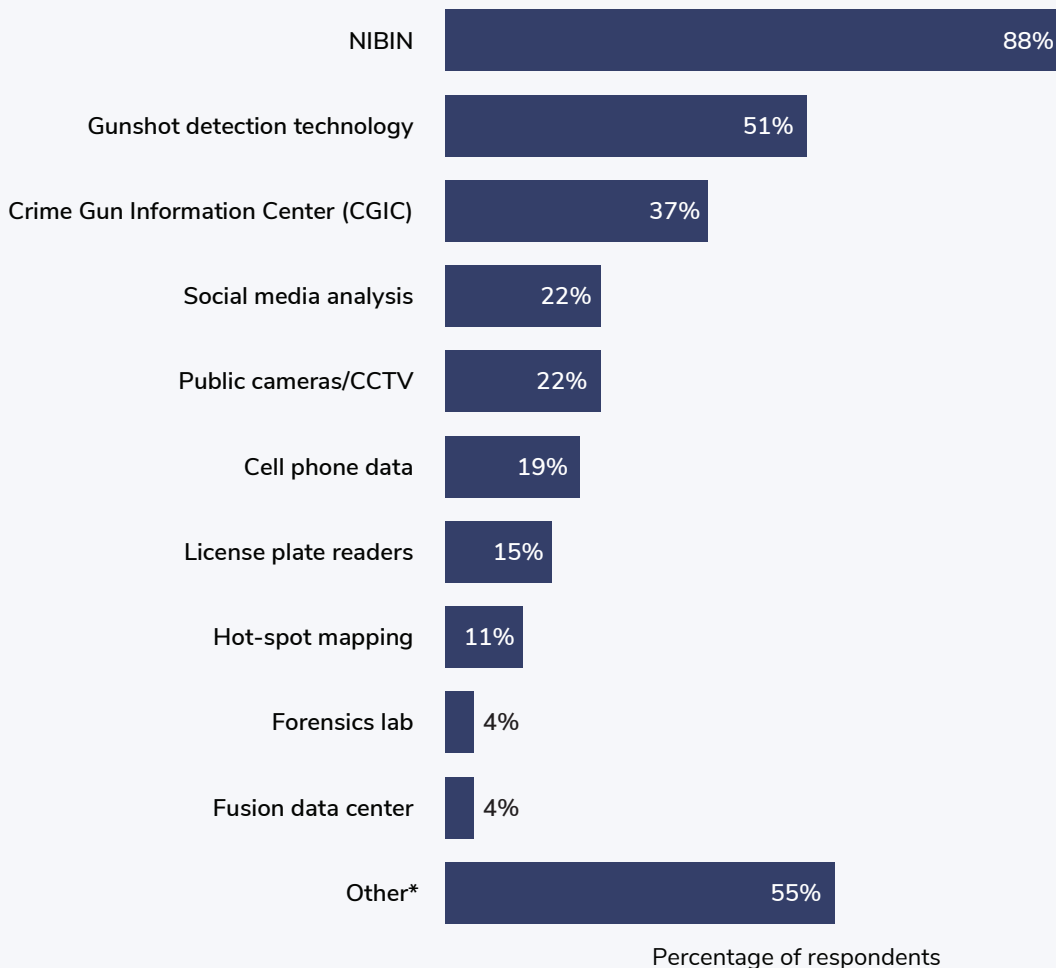
Percentage of respondents

n = 87

What technologies are used to enhance PSN-related investigations?

Another key component of PSN is the use of technology to bolster investigations and collect intelligence. The three technologies mentioned most frequently by PSN Coordinators all involve firearm-related offenses and investigations: the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN; 88%), gunshot detection technology (51%), and Crime Gun Information Centers (37%). See Figure 12. The technologies shown in Figure 12 are not an exhaustive list; they are items that Coordinators proactively mentioned as being important or used frequently in their districts.

Figure 12. Technologies Used to Enhance PSN Enforcement Activities



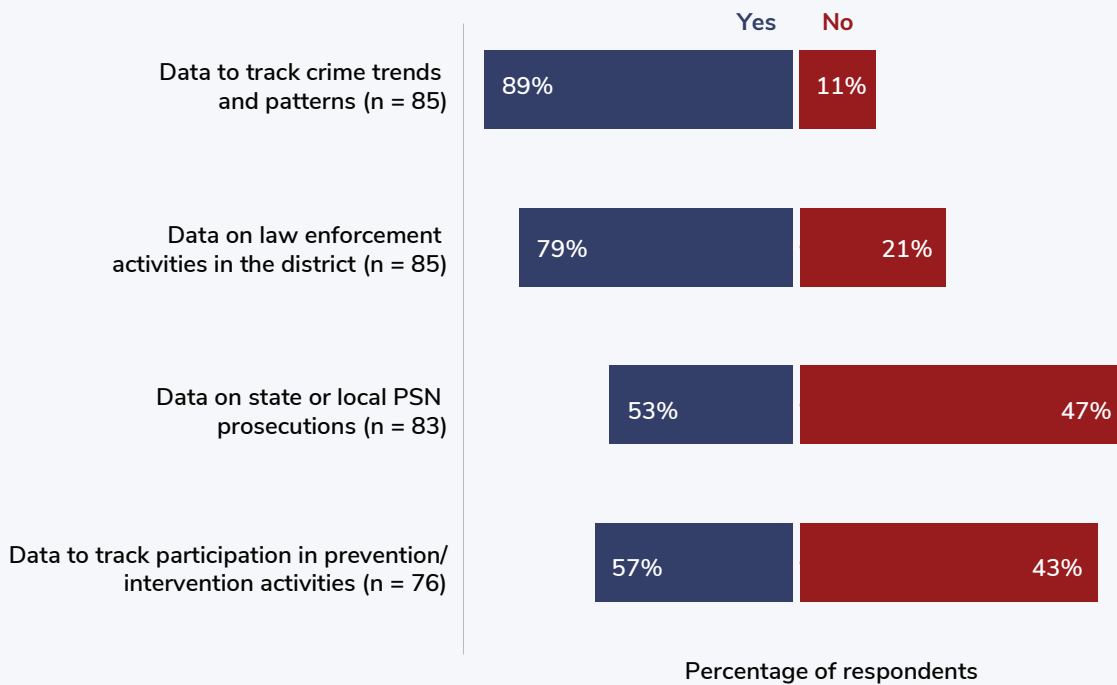
n = 89. CCTV, closed-circuit television; NIBIN, National Integrated Ballistic Information Network.

* Examples of other technologies mentioned include data analysis and data sharing programs, body-worn cameras, online anonymous tip portals, GPS, and Zoom (for meetings).

What types of data do Coordinators have access to for supporting PSN?

Given the importance of data-driven decision-making to the PSN model, Coordinators were asked whether or not they had access to several key types of data. Almost all Coordinators (89%) reported having access to data for tracking trends and patterns in crime in the PSN areas. See Figure 13. (Of those, almost all [93%] had access to data for tracking firearm crimes specifically; not shown in Figure 13.) Four-fifths of Coordinators (79%) reported having access to data on law enforcement activities in the district. Slightly more than half reported access to data on state or local prosecutions (53%). Of the 76 Coordinators who reported having prevention or intervention activities in their district’s PSN program, 43 (57%) reported access to data on participation or other metrics related to implementation of those activities.

Figure 13. PSN Coordinators’ Access to Types of Data



Perceived Challenges and Accomplishments

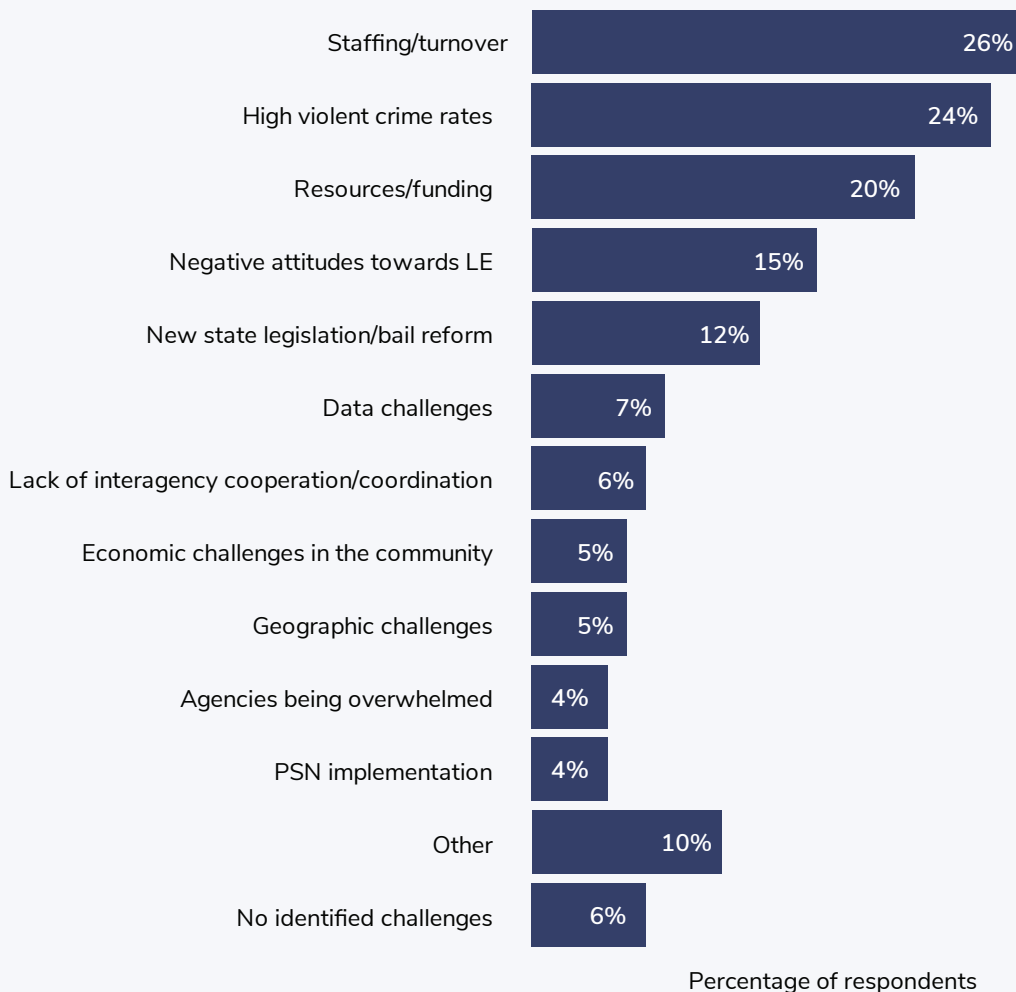
What PSN-related challenges have the districts faced in the past 12 months?

Coordinators were asked about the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had in their PSN areas in terms of changes in crime and in PSN activities. The substantial effects of the pandemic on PSN implementation, activities, and impacts are described in a separate forthcoming report.

Asked whether there had been a push to reallocate police funds, 30 of the 83 Coordinators who answered this question (36%) said that there had been such an effort, but almost all of them said the push was unsuccessful or they were unaware of the result.

Asked to describe other challenges their PSN districts faced in the 12 months prior to the interviews, one in four Coordinators mentioned staffing and turnover issues (26%) and high violent crime rates (24%), and one in five mentioned resources or funding (20%). Some also described negative attitudes toward law enforcement (15%) or new legislation or bail reform (12%). See Figure 14.

Figure 14. PSN-Related Challenges in Past 12 Months (Excluding COVID-19)

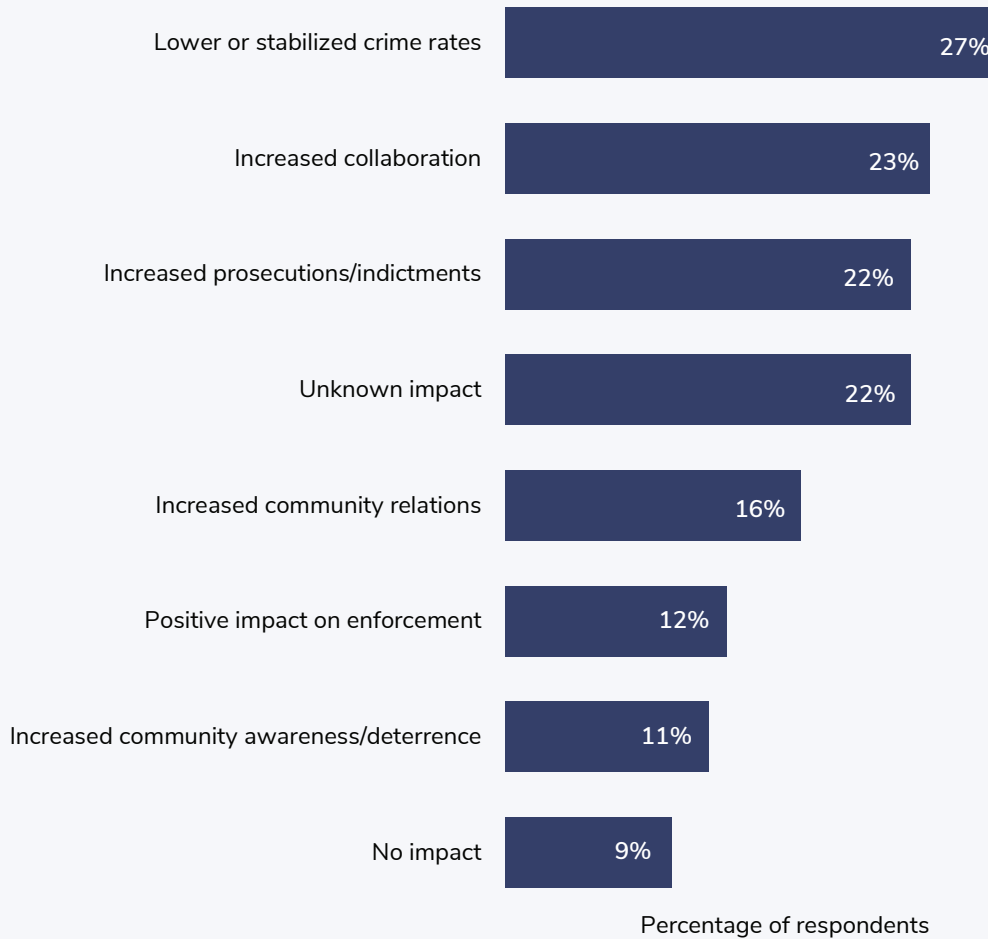


n = 84. LE, law enforcement.

What impact was PSN perceived to have had in the previous 12 months?

Asked to describe the overall impact of PSN in their district during the past 12 months, approximately one-fourth (27%) of PSN Coordinators stated that PSN contributed to lower or stabilized crime rates in their district over the previous 12 months (Figure 15). Other reported impacts included increased collaboration among all levels of law enforcement (23%), increased prosecutions and indictments (22%), and increased community relations (16%). Twenty-two percent of PSN Coordinators were uncertain of PSN's impact in their district, and another 9% stated that PSN had no impact. These findings reflect Coordinators' expressed perceptions of PSN's local impact. In separate analyses not presented in this report, the national evaluation is empirically measuring changes in violent crime in PSN districts and changes in the number and types of cases prosecuted federally.

Figure 15. Percentage of Coordinators Reporting Each Impact of PSN, Past 12 Months



n = 82

Conclusion

The evaluation team gathered a wealth of information during the national assessment interviews conducted with 91 PSN Coordinators across 88 federal districts from February to April 2022. One overarching finding is that **PSN strategies and activities vary significantly across the districts.**

- Some PSN Coordinators reported spending substantial portions of their time on PSN; others, significantly less. There are also large differences in the number of other USAO staff who contribute to PSN efforts and how frequently the U.S. Attorney is personally involved.
- More than half the districts focus PSN efforts on one entire city or county but some focus on areas within a single city or county and, at the other extreme, others cover the entire federal district.
- A variety of crimes, mostly violent crimes, are the focus of district PSN efforts; cases of a felon in possession of a firearm are a common focus.

This variability is in line with the PSN model, which encourages each district to tailor PSN to its needs, resources, and priorities.

PSN Coordinators generally showed **moderate to strong agreement with the importance of the core elements of the PSN model**, especially partnerships with all levels of law enforcement and leadership by the U.S. Attorney and USAO. Endorsement was not as strong for the importance of partnerships with the community and using data to assess PSN outcomes, which may be seen as less central to the mission of the USAO. Coordinators generally reported being more satisfied with their district's progress in implementing the elements they view as important to PSN.

Efforts **focused on the most violent offenders and areas** were commonly reported, as was the use of offender-focused community violence interventions. Violence prevention activities were less commonly reported. Most districts reported using NIBIN, the ATF's ballistic tracking system, and half reported using gunshot detection technology. Coordinators commonly reported having access to data to track crime trends and patterns and data on law enforcement activities.

Beyond the widespread effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on crime and PSN activities, PSN Coordinators identified other challenges, including staffing and turnover issues, spikes in violent crime, and constraints on resources or funding. Nonetheless, most PSN Coordinators perceived generally positive impacts of PSN, though that outlook was not universal and the particular positive impacts that were reported varied among respondents.

This report paints a picture of the variation in PSN approaches and provides PSN practitioners and policymakers with a clearer sense of how the key elements of PSN have been implemented in districts across the country. The findings in this report offer implications for various PSN stakeholders.

- For DOJ officials overseeing and supporting PSN, these findings suggest that across the federal districts, PSN teams are implementing varied programs tailored to local needs and resources; the use of locally determined approaches is in accord with the PSN model. Findings also indicate that Coordinators see the PSN elements that are most closely aligned with the USAOs' mission—in particular, partnering with all levels of law enforcement—as the most important elements and the ones on which PSN teams have made the most progress.

- For entities providing training and technical assistance or other support to PSN teams, findings suggest that Coordinators do not uniformly endorse the importance of all elements in the PSN model and may benefit from information reinforcing that all elements are important. Similarly, findings suggest that some Coordinators or PSN teams may benefit from additional support in achieving progress on certain elements—for example, community engagement.
- For PSN Coordinators and their teams, these findings indicate that USAOs are implementing PSN fairly uniformly in some regards (for example, partnering with law enforcement) but with substantial variability in others (for example, the amount of time Coordinators spend on PSN). Coordinators who reported less satisfaction with progress in partnering with the community, preventing additional violence, or using data to assess PSN outcomes are encouraged to reach out to their PSN colleagues or the training and technical assistance team for ideas on how to bolster these efforts.

The evaluation team is also examining whether aspects of PSN implementation described in this report are associated with changes in key crime outcomes, including murder, robbery, and aggravated assault. Those findings may offer additional insights into the benefits of various approaches to local implementation of PSN.

In closing, the evaluation team offers its sincere gratitude to the PSN Coordinators who participated in the interviews. Your taking the time to share your experiences and insights made this report possible.