Abstract

Homicides in the United States, which disproportionately involve firearms, remain more common than in most other developed nations, despite the substantial decline in lethal violence observed in America during the 1990’s. Can police patrols that are dedicated to reducing illegal gun carrying help reduce gun violence? Based on an article published by the Brookings Institution (Cohen & Ludwig 2003), this brief reports on an evaluation of a 1998 Pittsburgh policing patrol program focused on illegal gun carrying in high-crime areas during the highest-risk periods. The results of this evaluation are consistent with the idea that additional police patrols targeted against illegal gun carrying may yield substantial reductions in gun violence. The Pittsburgh policing program focused on illegally carried firearms in two of the city’s highest crime areas during the peak crime periods of 8pm to midnight, Wednesday through Saturday. The additional five-officer, three-vehicle targeted patrols represented a 25 to 50 percent increase in patrol officers in these high-crime communities. The analysis suggests that the patrols contributed to as much as a 71% decline in hospital-treated assault-related gunshot injuries. No citizen complaints were filed against the Pittsburgh police as a result of the new directed-patrol program. If our evaluation results are correct, directed police patrols against illegal gun carrying may be a very cost-effective way to reduce gun violence. The $35,000 cost of supporting the additional police patrols may yield benefits to the citizens of Pittsburgh from fewer gunshot injuries that are worth as much as $25 million.