

**National Institute of Justice  
Evaluation of the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission:  
Executive Summary**

**February 2010**

**Deborah Azrael, PhD  
Harvard School of Public Health**

**Anthony Braga, PhD  
Harvard Kennedy School of Government**

**Mallory O'Brien, PhD  
Harvard School of Public Health**

*Suggested Citation: Azrael, Deborah; Braga, Anthony & O'Brien, Mallory. (2010, February), Evaluation of the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission: Executive Summary. Developed under cooperative agreement #2005-IF-CX-0005 with the National Institute of Justice and Harvard College for the Evaluation of the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission, Solicitation for Crime and Justice Research.*

# **National Institute of Justice**

## **Evaluation of the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission:**

### **Executive Summary**

#### **Background**

In May 2004, the City of Milwaukee, Wisconsin assembled a working team of professionals charged with developing a multi-level, multi-agency homicide review process (the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission – MHRC) to address the City’s ongoing problem with lethal violence. The goal of the Commission – then as now – was to foster and support innovative homicide prevention and intervention strategies using the emerging tool of strategic problem analysis. During the project period, funding for the initiative came from the Wisconsin Partnership Fund for a Healthy Future, administered through the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, Project Safe Neighborhoods, administered through the U.S. Attorneys Office, and Violence Against Women Act monies administered through the Wisconsin Office of Justice Statistics.

While an increasing number of police agencies have adopted the use of crime incident reviews to develop criminal justice prevention strategies as a result of the U.S. Department of Justice-sponsored Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative (Klofas and Hipple, 2006; Braga, 2005), the homicide review process remains largely unevaluated. In February 2005, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) funded the Harvard School of Public Health to evaluate the MHRC and to answer the broad question: what does the homicide review process add to the City of Milwaukee’s capacity to respond to the problem of lethal violence?

#### **Evaluation Scope**

The evaluation, which utilized a randomized matched pair design, consisted of three principal components: 1) a formative evaluation, 2) a process evaluation, and 3) an impact evaluation. More specifically, through semi-structured interviews and analysis of homicide data collected as part of the project, the evaluation examined whether homicide reviews provide additional insights into the nature of homicide problems relative to traditional methods; whether these insights lead to the development of new strategic responses to homicide problems; whether law enforcement agencies, social service providers, and the community feel that sharing information improves their ability to work together; and whether these responses seem to have short-term homicide reduction impacts.

#### **Evaluation Findings**

From January 2005 through December 2007, the period of time covered by this evaluation, the MHRC conducted thirty criminal justice reviews, fifteen community service provider reviews and two community reviews, covering cases from January 2005 through November 2007. Reviews at all levels were coordinated by MHRC staff who managed the MHRCs’ data collection efforts and analyzed aggregate data to help the MHRC frame prevention strategies. As described below (see Impact Evaluation), the data developed through the MHRC were far more comprehensive and accurate than data previously available.

Overall, the homicide review process revealed that homicides in the City's intervention districts were largely clustered in very specific places, such as in and around taverns, and among active offenders who were very well known to the criminal justice system. Homicides were often the outcome of an ongoing dispute between individuals and/or groups (usually gangs) and involved respect, status, and retribution as motives.

The principal "product" of the MHRC has been a comprehensive set of *actionable* recommendations developed by the review teams and ratified by the Working and Executive Committees of the MHRC, implementation of which was continually monitored by the Commission. In general, the MHRC recommendations better positioned criminal justice, social service, and community-based organizations to address high-risk places and high-risk people central to recurring homicide problems. These recommendations have led to significant changes in the policies and procedures of the MPD and other agencies and are credited by participants for improving both criminal justice and community provider capacity to prevent violence. A key to this increased capacity has been improved communication, information sharing and cooperation both within and between criminal justice agencies, community service providers and community members.

Using a time series of monthly counts of homicides in the control and treatment districts (January 1999 – December 2006), our impact evaluation revealed that the implementation of the MHRC interventions was associated with a statistically significant 52% decrease in the monthly count of homicide in the treatment districts. The control districts experienced a non-significant 9.2% decrease in homicide, controlling for the other covariates. While these analyses can't be used to specify the exact effect of the MHRC interventions, they do make a solid case that the MHRC interventions were associated with a noteworthy decrease in homicide. As such, we conclude that the homicide review process adds considerable value to understanding the nature of urban homicide problems, crafting appropriate interventions to address underlying risks associated with homicides, implementing innovative strategies to address these risks, and assessing the impacts of these strategies.

## Citations

1. Braga, A. (2005). Analyzing Homicide Problems: Practical Approaches to Developing a Policy-relevant Description of Serious Urban Violence. *Security Journal* 18: 17 – 32.
2. Klofas, J. and N.K. Hipple (2006). *Crime Incident Reviews*. (Project Safe Neighborhoods: Strategic Interventions Case Study No. 3.) Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.