

Project Exile: Federal Intrusion into Local Crime

Background

In 1997, Richmond, VA. had the highest murder rate among all American cities. According to James Comey, then the Assistant U.S. Attorney in charge of the Eastern District of Virginia: "We had an environment in criminal communities where the gun was an article of clothing." In response, Mayor Tim Kaine and Comey began Project Exile. Exile involved a two-part strategy. First, Exile shifted the prosecution of illegal gun possession from the state system to the federal courts. In the federal system, offenders faced longer sentences in faraway federal prisons - the convicted were "exiled" from their community. Second, the threat of federal prosecution was broadcasted to the city on buses, billboards, and television ads. The advertisement feature of Exile was funded through public funding from local businesses and organizations. Following the launch of Exile, Richmond experienced a 33% drop in homicides in 1998. In 1999, homicides declined by another 21%. This success propelled the growth of Exile-like programs across the country. Dozens of cities and towns were quick to adopt the program. It gained bipartisan support among politicians. Endorsements came from both the NRA and the Brady Campaign.



A bus in Richmond advertising Project Exile.

2. Next Steps

Project Exile created an opportunity for cities and local law enforcement to receive federal funding. Where did Exile fit in the history of federal funding being funneled to localities? From this point, I explored the history of gun-control and crime-related federal legislation beginning with the Gun Control Act of 1968 which established the statutes used in prosecuting offenders in Project Exile.

Methods

The bulk of the sources were from newspapers provided by Newspapers.com and through databases provided by Penn Libraries. Additionally, TRACFed was used to find federal case files that were part of Project Exile.



Initial Questions

- Why did Project Exile expand across the US when it did? What factors were driving its adoption?
- How did Exile become a vehicle for the federal government to involve itself in local law enforcement and local crime?

3. Findings

Project Exile's Past

The crime control and gun-control bills created a means for the federal government to involve itself in local police affairs by establishing millions of dollars in grants for cities to obtain. These funds were used not only by state and local law enforcement but by U.S. Attorneys to prosecute street crime. These were the same sort of tactics being employed in Project Exile. Going back to 1981, District Attorney Ed Rendell worked alongside the Eastern District of Pennsylvania U.S Attorney's office to prosecute gun-related crime. This illuminated that the tactics employed by Exile were not so novel. They had been employed for years prior. This revelation highlighted how Exile and other similar programs have a history dating back years before their creation.

Plea Deals Not Prosecutions

Academic literature on mass incarceration and mandatory minimums have emphasized how involving the federal court system (like Exile does) causes many cases to result in plea-deals rather than in convictions. This has created pushback against Exile which has disproportionately affected black males. Illuminating how cases are handled under Exile helps explain how prosecutors work to maximize the number of convictions and prison sentences involving street crime.

1. Observations

After combing through local newspapers, a few observations provided insight into why cities were adopting Exile:

1. City politicians argue an overburdened, local judicial system deals out meager or little sentences to gun-related crimes as opposed to federal court. As Ed Rendell explained, "We are not getting significant sentences, and, in some cases, no sentences [from local judges]." In the 1990s, city politicians continue to take a "tough on crime" stance. Getting the feds to target crime bolsters this image. As one criminologist says, "Legislators never lose votes by advocating severity".



Juma Sampson, an advocate for ending Exile and served 19 years in federal prison, speaks about his experience under the program.

4. Conclusion

Project Exile is a piece of the story of the federal government's involvement in local crime in the United States. To better understand Exile is to better understand why federal officers are being deployed into cities today. As I continue to research Exile this semester, I hope to help illuminate how this program explains the role of federal government in policing today.

Sources

1. Wesier Benjamin, "CITY: New Federal Prosecutor Inherits an Old Priority Terrorism Remains Office's Main Focus", New York Times, January 7, 2002, B4.
2. Dominic Perella (AP), "Gun crackdown draws criticism", Messenger-Inquirer, May 31, 1999, 4.
3. AP, "Accused of unfair sentencing", The Times, November 13, 1978, 1.
4. Smith, Jim. "Some Gun Offenders to Face U.S. Judges", Philadelphia Daily News, April 3, 1981, 14.
5. Wham. "Civil Rights Advocates Call for End to Project Exile in Monroe County." WHAM, WHAM, 11 July 2020.