COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS OF GUN RETURN PROGRAMS

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MPA5428 – Integrated Public Administration Project

Draft #1

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February 20th, 2014

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**Cost Benefit Analysis of Gun Return Programs**

Prior to undertaking the cost benefit analysis of a proposed gun return program, the purpose of the analysis must be defined. Many gun return programs have started in states in the northeast and west. The Gaston County police department in North Carolina briefly considered such a program, but may not move forward with its implementation. The following analysis is an attempt to forecast the reasons why such a program would or would not work in that particular community.

**Background**

The county would like to investigate the most effective way to implement a gun return program for the major cities and towns in the county in hopes of reducing gun crime and accidental shootings. In order to implement the new policy, the county plans to create a new community liaison position to represent the gun exchange program. This person, while need to have previous police and enforcement experience, would take the lead in the development and facilitation of the gun exchange program and the department of community services that would become part of the police departments in the county. This would mean hiring a professional at the director level, which could cost between 80,000 to 100,000 dollars in annual salary and benefits per year. The actual cost will depend on the amount of experience the candidate possesses. County officials must keep in mind that, in addition to the cost of salary and benefits for the potential director of the new program, there will be additional costs for implementing the program itself. The question for the county is – do they go ahead with the creation of the position, new department, and gun return program or does the county attempt to implement the gun return program without the creation of the new position?

**Characteristics of a gun exchange program**

Before moving forward with numbers, it is important for officials to understand the basics of gun return or gun exchange programs. By benchmarking programs in other states or counties, Gaston County Officials can adapt the new program to fit the needs of the local community.

In California, home of the longest-running gun return programs, a survey of the gun exchange programs was conducted in 1993 which cited various reasons for people to return their guns. Of important note is that zero persons 25 years of age and under responded to the survey. “Almost half the respondents (46%) cited concern that children might get and use the gun as an “important” reason for their participation in the program. Fewer than 15%, however, reported a previous bad experience with a gun or concern for a possible shooting in their home as important” (Romero, M.P., Winternute, G.J., & Vernick, J.S., 1998, p.206). Besides the personal motivation to turn in guns from Californians, as stated above, gun buy-back programs attempt to lure younger people with gimmicks such as cash or gift cards for guns or groceries for guns. “A state-sponsored cash-for-guns program in Camden County, New Jersey, saw the return of 1,137 firearms — the most successful buyback in state history, and not the only record-breaking return haul since Friday's [Newtown] massacre” (Abad-Santos, 2012). The motivation for this buyback program was the cash that citizens received when they were turned in. Guns could be returned with no questions asked in exchange for cash. When advertised properly and thoroughly, these programs have the potential to attract positive response from community members.

**Cost Benefit Analysis**

Cost benefit analysis (CBA) uses the rational method of policy making for its structure. The steps of CBA are clearly defined and each part of the process, when conducted properly, can take a significant amount of time to complete. In order to determine which approach to its gun return policy will be most cost-effective, the county of Gaston will need to perform CBA based on the current information available about crime rates, gun ownership rates, and attitudes toward guns to fully understand their needs for a gun return program. The possibility exists that a community liaison department may not be needed to create and maintain a successful gun return program in the county.

<Charts needed>

Gaston County gun crime rates

Gaston County gun ownership rates

Attitudes toward gun ownership

Step 1: Specify the objectives

The objective is to decide whether creating a community liaison department and hiring a full time director is the best method by which to create and implement a gun return program in Gaston County. One of the major responsibilities of this department will be to insure that citizens who no longer wish to own guns dispose of them properly. To accomplish this task will mean having a dedicated staff member or volunteer who will educate the community about the program, its benefits, and current gun laws.

Step 2: Identify alternatives

Alternatives to hiring a full time director include: 1) Do nothing, continue to run the department programs as they exist now and monitor gun related crime and incidents. 2) Create and run the program as planned with the new director and funds allocated to create the community liaison department. 3) Create and run the program using current department resources, giving current officers more responsibility on the job.

Step 3: Collection, analysis, and interpretation of information

The third step of CBA requires the careful examination of the cost and benefit of each alternative. In this case, with limited information available, the analyses of the alternatives are superficial. For instance, the first alternative, “do nothing” could save the department the cost of adding personnel and a completely new department to the organization. On the other hand, not creating the new department and/or gun return program could cost the community to suffer loss of life at either current levels or increased levels. Law enforcement in the county cannot predict if crime will increase, but can guess that, without intervention, the problem could remain at similar levels. This demonstrates one of the problems with the rational method of public policy analysis – the human problem of being unable to predict the future.

The second alternative, to create the new community outreach department and hire a full time director to create the program would cost the police department funds to develop and implement the gun return and other community programs of relevance. <waiting for return phone call and budget is being mailed to me.>

These costs not only include the cost of paying the full time director’s salary and benefits, but would include the costs of providing an operating budget for the community development department. The county commission would need to develop a capital plan for the addition of the department, evaluate areas of the county most in need, provide personnel or funding for personnel to ensure the maintenance of sound fiscal policy within the department, and aid in funding for future personnel development (Gaston County, 2014). The police department and county commission would also incur the cost of searching for a director. Advantages of creating the new department and hiring a new director would include a reduction in the workload of current officers, increased involvement in community activities from private citizens, an increased presence of law enforcement without intimidating citizens or losing their trust in the department, the creation of the gun return program would result in an unknown number of reclaimed weapons and possibly decrease crime and incident rates.

Asking for volunteers from either the department or the community to run the program would decrease the cost of hiring a director, but would have similar benefits to creating the full program. The costs of having volunteers from the police department would be that current officers would have increased responsibilities and little or no increase in pay. While volunteers from the community do not need to be paid, there will be a cost in training the volunteers to run the program and work with their fellow citizens. The program would still need an operating budget, to be determined by the county commission.

Step 4: Specification of target groups

Target groups for this program who would need to have input before, during, and after its creation and development include gun owners (including possible gang members, hunters, other private citizens, and police officers), non-gun owners, the county commission, and possibly elected officials at the State level.

Step 5: Identification of types of costs and benefits to stakeholders

For gun owners, the benefits are direct, but intangible. Such benefits include the decreased possibility of being jailed due to unlawful gun ownership, a decrease in violent gun crimes, and a decrease in gun accidents. Possible costs could include the intangible feeling of being unsafe in one’s home for private citizens or the feeling that rights are being violated. For unlawful gun owners who engage in criminal activity, the tangible loss of income from illegal activity could be a real issue and cause an increase in other crimes. Other citizens may realize the direct, intangible benefits of feeling a sense of being rewarded for their community involvement. Gun return programs in several states (Map, 2012) such as California, New York and Arizona, give out gift cards or cash to citizens who return guns (Hobson, 2012; Abad-Santos, 2012). The police force could realize a decrease in violent gun crimes and gang activity because of the increase presence of active, educated citizens within the community. This could decrease the demand for police patrols and strengthen the relationship and trust between the police and private citizens.

Step 6: Discounting of costs and benefits

In order to discount the costs and benefits for each of the alternatives, the analyst would need to know the costs of the loss of a person’s life due to gun violence, the cost of paying overtime to police officers, the in-kind cost of having volunteers in the department, and the cost of training volunteers.

Step 7: Estimation of risk and uncertainty

The goal of estimating risk and uncertainty is for the analyst to give the policy maker some ideas of what could happen for difference scenarios posed in the CBA (Clemons & McBeth, 2009). The consequence of doing nothing would result in uncertainty about rates of gun crime in the county. Officers would have a similar work load, but if the current trend is that gun related crimes and incidents are increasing, then the department can assume that there will be increased responsibility on current staff. If the county commission and police department decide to implement the program and hire a new director, not only with the cost of creating the program be incurred by the department and commission, but the continued maintenance of the department would be the fiscal responsibility of the department. Bringing in citizen volunteers may not be a good option either, due to the high rate of turnover in volunteerism, it will be necessary to have someone within the department recruit, train, and direct these volunteers regardless of the creation of the department or hiring of a director.

Step 8: Specification of criteria for recommendation

In this case, the criteria for recommendation should include the full analysis of the operating cost of creating a full department and gun return program versus the full operating cost of creating a volunteer version of the program alone. Other criteria for decision include the state of the county and State budget – is there a deficit, resulting in cuts to county entities or is there surplus of funds available? While the implementation of a gun return program would be an attempt to make the community safer, it may result in the reduction of police officers if the program costs too much to run.

Step 9: Recommendation

Based on preliminary analysis and the current state of the county budget, it would not be prudent for the police department to create a full department at this time. Many departments are having funding cut from the State budget, resulting in smaller percentage of dollars allocated to counties from the State of North Carolina. Also, if the County of Gaston receives a smaller amount of tax revenue for its operating budget as is, there would be no room for expansion at this time.

**Conclusion**

Once several logical options have been discovered by using rational analysis, the further rational analysis of each situation can aid in deciding which option is best when solving the policy issue posed. While the analyst can recommend the best solution, it is still up to the policy decision makers to decide which route best serves the community. In this case, it was established that being fiscally responsible was the most important criteria for the decision and recommended that the county forego the implementation of a new program, given the possible fiscal responsibilities.

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