FIRST JUDICIAL DISTRICT
ADULT PROBATION & PAROLE DEPARTMENT

STRATEGIC ANTI-VIOLENCE UNIT (SAV-U)

What is SAV-U?

The Strategic Anti-Violence Unit (SAV-U) is a product of the partnership between the University of Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Adult Probation and Parole Department. The unit consists of five probation/parole officers—three experienced veteran officers and two new hires that recently completed their Masters of Science in Criminology at the University of Pennsylvania. The caseload of each of the five officers is not to exceed 15 offenders.

Supervision Philosophy

The goal of SAV-U is the prevention of serious violent crime. To accomplish this mission, SAV-U practices an evidence-based, proactive supervision strategy. Borrowing from Faye Taxman's work, the SAV-U plan and response model follows this general formula: 1) Assessment of the problems; 2) Analysis of possible responses; 3) Development of responses; and 4) Reassessment of the responses. SAV-U officers aim to motivate positive behavioral change by working with the offender towards common goals (e.g. gaining employment or educational milestones). SAV-U aims to emphasize the importance of the *content* of each contact, rather than simply the number and length of each contact.

Offender Treatments

Offenders assigned to SAV-U are intensely supervised; offenders have (at minimum) weekly office visits, in addition to weekly field/home visits with two plainclothes Philadelphia police officers. Offenders are drug tested and referred to/placed in drug treatment if necessary. In addition to helping the offender achieve his educational and employment goals, SAV–U officers recognize in their offender any lifeskill deficiencies and address those issues accordingly. All SAV-U offenders are evaluated by a Penn psychiatric social worker, and if indicated, they receive Cognitive Behavioral Therapy from a University of Pennsylvania psychiatrist. Officers exercise graduated sanctions when responding to behavior that could result in technical violations of probation/parole, and they also work with the offender's family to provide additional services that can improve the quality of life of the offender and his family. Officers work with offenders to identify triggers that lead to criminal behavior, and encourage offenders to self-diagnose and self-manage their own behaviors. Officers also work to address their offenders' criminal associations/networks, and replace those negative associations with more positive influences.

About the Predictive Model/Case Selection

SAV-U is not a sentencing option. Rather, it is a unit for those offenders who have been statistically identified as being at the highest risk of committing homicide within two years of their probation start date. The predictive model used to determine this risk was developed via the highly sophisticated technique of statistical data-mining by Professor Richard Berk of the University of Pennsylvania. The model used over 500,000 adult probation/parole cases going back to 1969 to determine what factors most strongly predict homicide in the probation population. Professor Berk determined the following variables to be the strongest predictors of homicide:

1) Gender: Males are much more likely to commit homicide than females.
2) Age at first contact with the criminal court: Individuals who appeared in adult court before the age of 18 are more likely to commit homicide than individuals who first appeared in adult court after the age of 18.
3) Age at probation start date: Individuals who are below the age of 25 at the beginning of their court-ordered term of supervision are more likely to commit homicide than offenders who begin their probation/parole at an older age.
4) Prior gun offenses: Individuals with prior gun arrests are more likely to commit homicide than individuals who have no gun priors.

Cases are selected by "dropping cases down the model." You can think of the model as a decision tree, and depending on whether the case (or individual who has been sentenced to probation) meets different criteria at each "step," it is deemed either high risk or not. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and the Department of Probation and Parole are in the process of developing a computer program to perform this operation whenever necessary.

Testing the Effects of SAV-U

SAV-U is part of an ongoing effort on the part of APPD to use data and evidence to guide policy and decision making. While we believe that we have developed a unit that has great potential to reduce violent crime in Philadelphia, the only way to know for certain the effects of SAV-U is to implement an experimental research design. Beginning in early 2007, cases identified as being at the highest risk for committing homicide have been randomly assigned to either SAV-U (the experimental group) or standard supervision as ordered by the court (the control group, or "treatment as usual"). Random assignment allows for a fair and reliable comparison between those offenders assigned to standard supervision and those assigned to SAV-U. Preliminary results of the experiment will be available in early 2008. If the experiment shows that the SAV-U model is effective in preventing serious violence, the department will seek additional funding to expand the program. As many as 100 SAV-U officers would be needed to cover all of the probationers at high risk for committing homicide or attempted homicide.