

David M. Kennedy

“Homicide prevention in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil: An advanced adaptation of focused deterrence”

Focused deterrence is a framework for addressing serious violence and crime problems that has been evolving for nearly thirty years; has amassed an extensive positive evaluation record; and has been adapted to a range of substantive problems, including group and gang violence, individual violent offenders, overt drug markets, intimate partner violence, prison safety, and others. Its origin and most of its applications are in the United States, but there is increasing interest and adaptation elsewhere, including Scotland and elsewhere in the UK, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. A recent and extremely ambitious such innovation is in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil, a region of over 11 million population, including the capital city of Porto Alegre, with over 1.3 million. Porto Alegre, especially, has historically had very high homicide rates, and extreme violence characterized by sustained disputes between organized gangs, kidnappings, and beheadings and other mutilations. Starting in 2023, a new homicide command in the Department of Homicide and Personal Protection conducted an analysis showing that homicide and serious violence was overwhelmingly connected with identifiable organized criminal networks; created an intelligence function for the continuous tracking and analysis of homicides; integrated several distinct police, judicial, and corrections agencies into one unified strategy; developed a seven-stage graduated response to homicide, with interventions both in the community and inside prisons; and systematically communicated to criminal networks that homicide and violence was the official priority and what those predictable responses would be. This application of focused deterrence is one of, if not the, most ambitious and institutionally elaborate strategies to date. It appears to be having effect; so far in 2024 homicide has fallen 44% over the same period in 2023, to the lowest levels ever recorded.

We propose a panel that would locate the Rio Grande do Sul intervention in the logic of focused deterrence and internationally consistent empirical characteristics of homicide and serious violence; address the problem analysis and policy and operational design that led to the intervention; highlight the institutional innovations that have supported it; address the concurrent changes in violence; and consider the intervention as part of the broad pattern of adaption with strategic fidelity that has characterized the replication and evolution of focused deterrence.

Panelists would include David M. Kennedy, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, one of the originating figures in focused deterrence; director of the Department of Homicide and Personal Protection Mario Sousa and his colleague Del Thiago Bennemann, principal architects of the intervention; and discussant Alberto Kopittke, executive director of the Instituto Cidade Segura (Safe City Institute) in Brazil, a focused deterrence practitioner in his own right and an advisor to the Rio Grande do Sol team.