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## Project Disarm targets suburbs

**By Dan Horn**  
**Enquirer staff writer**

A southern Ohio program that has sent hundreds of repeat offenders to prison for carrying guns is expanding to the suburbs, where authorities say armed criminals are a growing problem.

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The federal program, known as Project Disarm, has operated mostly in Cincinnati and other larger Ohio cities for four years.

The program allows local police to refer gun cases to federal prosecutors if the cases involve suspects with long criminal records. In many cases, the suspects face significantly longer prison sentences in federal court than in the state system.

Suburban police say they welcome the chance to use a program that Cincinnati police have praised as a way to get the worst-of-the-worst criminals off the street.

"Anything that could keep violent people locked up longer is something we would be interested in," said Green Township Police Chief Bart West. "If you can keep them locked up, they can't commit more crimes."

Since 2002, Project Disarm has led to 690 convictions in southern Ohio - 180 of them in Cincinnati - with prison sentences ranging from about five to 15 years.

The sentences would have been shorter in state court because federal law imposes mandatory sentences on offenders with three or more serious felony convictions. That's true even if their most recent arrest was on a minor charge, such as a traffic violation.

While law enforcement officials support the program and its expansion to the suburbs, defense attorneys have complained for years that Project Disarm imposes unreasonably long sentences and punishes African-Americans more often than whites.

"There is definitely a disproportionate number of male blacks who are going to be picked up on this charge," said C. Ransom Hudson, a federal public defender who handles about 10 Project Disarm cases a year.

Police and prosecutors agree most people prosecuted under the program have been black: A review in 2003 found that 27 of 28 cases referred by Cincinnati police to federal court involved blacks.

But authorities say that's largely due to the program's focus on urban areas, which have large black populations.

Prosecutors say they treat every case the same regardless of race, and they believe the program's expansion may lead to more arrests of white defendants.

Suburban police, like their counterparts in the city, say their top concern is sending repeat offenders with guns to prison for as long as possible.

They say the problem of illegal gun possession is spreading, and Project Disarm should expand as well.

"We would probably use (the program) fairly frequently," said Springfield Township Police Chief David Heimpold, whose department leads Hamilton County's suburbs in arrests with about 300 a month. "We get a lot of guns. We get a lot of the same problems as the city."

Project Disarm's goal is to reduce the gun violence that since January 2002 has wounded 1,588 people in Cincinnati and killed a growing number each year.

The theory is simple: Imprisoning gun-toting criminals makes it impossible for them to use those guns against someone else.

"These guys are not looking to be reformed," said Lucy Logan, founder of the Cincinnati-based group Who Killed Our Kids? "The people brandishing guns on a routine basis need to be locked up."

That has been the battle cry of the agencies that currently participate in Project Disarm, including Cincinnati police, the Hamilton County Sheriff's department and the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco Firearms and Explosives.

Now, prosecutors say, they want suburban police to join the battle.

Prosecutors from the U.S. Attorney's office in Cincinnati recently briefed police chiefs on the program and its potential benefits. They also sent letters urging the chiefs to participate.

"This is an effort to move this beyond the inner city," said Karl Kadon, a special assistant U.S. attorney. "The illegal use of firearms is epidemic."

So far, the program has not been a hard sell. Although many suburban departments do not keep formal tallies of guns confiscated in crimes, most say the number is on the rise.

An Enquirer survey of three dozen departments last January found that a majority reported increases in gun-related crimes or gun confiscations.

"This gives us another tool we can use," Sharonville Police Chief Mike Schappa said of Project Disarm. "We are finding more guns out here."

## **Fairness an issue**

Kadon said the program also encourages suspects to talk about bigger gun smuggling operations in exchange for a lesser sentence.

"It's amazing what the prospect of a decade in federal prison will do for someone's willingness to respect the rules," Kadon said.

Cincinnati police say several cases have spawned larger investigations.

One led to the arrest of a man who was charged with selling assault weapons from the trunk of his car at a White Castle in Cincinnati. Another tracked down 77 guns that had been sold illegally at a flea market.

Most cases, though, extend no further than the repeat offenders who are caught with a gun.

Robert Jackson Jr., who pleaded guilty Dec. 13 to possession of a handgun, has five convictions for serious felonies from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, including robbery.

The Cincinnati man was caught with a .25 caliber pistol when police arrested him earlier this year on a drug charge.

Prosecutors say he's the kind of dangerous offender Project Disarm has helped send to prison.

But Hudson, his lawyer, said his client has not been arrested on a charge more serious than drug abuse since 1985.

He said Jackson has a bad record but does not deserve a possible 10-year prison sentence.

"I don't think it's always rationally applied," Hudson said of the federal law. "It's a fundamental fairness issue."

Since only repeat offenders can be sent to federal court, prosecutors say only those deserving of a stiff sentence end up there.

They say the process of vetting the referrals also is race-neutral. It begins, they say, with a report from local police stating only the facts of the case and the suspect's criminal history - no name or race is included.

"These are people who just keep doing the same thing over and over and over again," West said. "These are the ones we're most concerned about."

E-mail [dhorn@enquirer.com](mailto:dhorn@enquirer.com)

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