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Decentralization in Texas Police Departments

Purpose of Bulletin

In 1930 the Houston Police Department became the first municipal police agency in the state of Texas to decentralize when it opened its North Shepard substation. A highly centralized form of police organization was initially questioned in the wake of the urban riots in the 1960s (Goldstein 1990). Since that time, departments have gradually become increasingly decentralized to more effectively serve their communities.

This bulletin examines operational elements of decentralization in 41 Texas agencies, with a focused section on decentralization in the El Paso Police Department.

Background

A broad decentralization trend has swept through many organizations in recent years. In a recent issue of *Marketing Research: A Magazine of Management & Applications*, the pros and cons of centralization versus decentralization were examined. The authors concluded that the quality of work is generally superior in a centralized structure, primarily because there is typically a unit in such structures dedicated to marketing research. However, a major advantage of decentralization is its flexibility. Its structure may provide a better understanding of the needs of an organization. Since determining which structure provides the best value is not clear, most firms choose a structure that combines both centralized and decentralized functions (Kitaeff 1993).

National Patterns in Police Decentralization

Decentralization in police departments is through the implementation of substations, neighborhood storefronts and mobile storefronts. A department may choose to implement one or more of these facilities depending upon geographic size and population of its jurisdiction, human resources, budget, and types of services administrators wish to provide.

Many problems police confront occur citywide; others, however, are indigenous to certain areas. Dealing with these problems requires officers close to a community to identify, analyze, and then directly attack each particular problem.

Substations are termed district stations in the Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department, and mini-precincts in the Virginia Beach Police Department, where they were initially located in a fire station and operated on day and evening shifts, five days a week (Jacocks 1989). These substations are said to have proven a vital asset in providing improved police services to the community, as well as other ancillary benefits (e.g., community meeting facilities, crime prevention assistance, youth programs, etc.).

In 1985, the chief of the Colorado Springs Police Department assigned a task force to look at all agency divisions. After three months it recommended a major reconfiguration of the department. As a result, three substations were added, the department's computer system was upgraded for smoother transition and written directives were changed to accommodate the decentralization process (Munger 1990).

Some departments have found limited advantages in decentralizing their department. Whereas it may be advantageous to decentralize the patrol function in a particular department, it may not prove feasible to decentralize other police functions. The Las Vegas Police Department's *Staff Study of Decentralization of the Burglary Function* (1989) cited several drawbacks in the decentralization of the burglary unit. Burglary detectives at substations did not communicate well with other detectives, and the supervisory chain-of-command suffered. Other concerns included span of control, unity of command, space allocation, office equipment, and clerical staff problems. Additionally, decentralization was very expensive and complicated.

However, the report noted that decentralizing a burglary investigative unit is not completely without merit. Additionally, for decentralization to work effectively, policy, procedure, and a communications network need to be developed first. With decentralization, investigative specialists in specific areas should be replaced with generalists. Advantages cited include:

1. Detectives communicate more effectively with officers in the field because they know them.
2. Detectives know the area better and want to do a good job.
3. Detectives have more empathy for the victims.
4. Detectives become more generalists and subsequently are more flexible with the cases they are assigned.
5. Detectives in substations located over 50 [sic] miles from a centralized bureau are closer to work.

Polling 15 agencies that had decentralized their detective bureau, the Las Vegas P.D. study found that nine agencies reported positive results, while six reported negative results. The reasons cited for negative reactions were primarily due to cost (Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department 1989).

"At the end of 11 months, the reduction in mileage on substation patrol cars, coupled with an average additional patrol time of one-half hour per officer per shift, amounted to a savings of approximately \$26,000" (A. M. Jacocks, *The Virginia Beach Experience*).

"There is a growing feeling in police circles that an officer who is familiar with an area and its people is less likely to resort to force to control a situation than one who, foreign to an area, is suddenly injected into a situation..." (Goldstein, *Problem-Oriented Policing*).

"This process [decentralization] has brought about new ways of thinking, acting, and achieving the department's mission and goals among all levels of personnel" (J.D. Munger, and E. Spivey, *Facility Planning in Colorado: Form vs. Function*).

"It has been substantiated that law enforcement agencies responsible for patrolling large areas can significantly enhance their operational effectiveness and efficiency by establishing substations" (A.M. Jacocks, *The Virginia Beach Experience*).

Decentralization in Texas Police Departments

Decentralization is an issue faced by most medium- to large-sized Texas police agencies. Forty-one Texas police departments responded to questionnaires concerning decentralization and its effect on staffing levels, budgets, functions, and chains-of-command.

For purposes of this study, the following definitions were provided to each agency to assist in uniformity:

Substations—Generally operates 24 hours a day; has access, via computer links, to a majority of the department's files; has facilities for officers located in the building including lockers, showers, exercise rooms, training capabilities through video link, and an on-line briefing system.

Storefronts—Approximately 1,000 to 1,500 square foot facilities located in strip centers or malls. They serve primarily as public information centers, with limited police resources.

Mobile storefronts—Function is similar to storefronts, but rather than using a structure to operate from, are located in motor homes, vans, or buses that can be moved to different locations within a jurisdiction as needed.

Of the 41 agencies responding, 34 percent utilize storefronts, 24 percent utilize substations, and 17 percent utilize mobile storefronts. As expected, decentralization correlates with size. Several departments utilize more than one type of facility. All three types of facilities are utilized by the Dallas, San Antonio, Fort Worth, and Austin Police Departments.

Substations. Ten Texas agencies utilize one or more substations. The Houston and Dallas Police Departments have the most substations with ten and six, respectively. The rank of the commander of a substation varied from agency to agency with 60 percent headed by captains, 20 percent headed by deputy/assistant chiefs, 10 percent headed by lieutenants, and 10 percent by sergeants. (One must be cautious about rank equivalencies, however. For example, the third highest rank in Houston is captain, while in Dallas it is deputy chief.) Of those substations with a criminal investigation division, 63 percent report to the substation commander, and 37 percent report to central command. The number of officers assigned to each substation varies with the size of the department and jurisdictional responsibilities, from a low of five officers in the Dallas County Sheriff's Office, to a high of 347 officers in one of the Houston Police Department substations.

Agencies Employing Substations

Houston, Dallas, El Paso, Austin, Fort Worth, Arlington, and San Antonio Police Departments, and the Harris County, Travis County, and Dallas County Sheriff's Departments.

Percentage of Departments Which Provide Given Services in Substations

Training	50%
Administration	50%
Crime analysis	40%
Vehicle maintenance facilities	40%
Jail/lock-up	40%
Records	20%

- "Each substation is a police department for its district." *Harris County Sheriff's Office representative*
- A substation "operates as an extension of the police department." *El Paso P.D. representative*

Rank-Ordered Advantages of Substations

Advantages	Weighted Average*	Rank
Improved community relations	2.1	1
Increased officer attachment to community where he/she works	3.6	2
Increase in overall operational efficiency and effectiveness of department	3.9	3
Improved response time	4.0	4
Improved operational facilities	4.6	5
Increased officer morale	5.7	6
Improved lines of communication between patrol and CID	6.8	7
Increased longevity of patrol vehicle due to decreased mileage	7.0	8
Money savings	8.4	9
Decrease in disciplinary actions against officers	8.7	10

* Weighted averages are provided for "advantages" and "disadvantages" categories to give the reader a more detailed explanation of how these agencies perceived each variable's impact on their department. Weighted averages are determined by summing the number of ranked responses a specific category receives, and then dividing that number by the total responses for that particular category. For instance, if the "budget issues" category is selected by five departments as the third greatest advantage, and two departments as the fifth greatest advantage, the equation would be $5 \times 3 = (15) + 2 \times 5 = (10)$ divided by the total number of respondents, or $15 + 10 / 7 = 3.5$ weighted average.

Rank-Ordered Disadvantages of Substations

Disadvantages	Weighted Average	Rank
Decrease in unity of command	2.6	1
Conflicting operational guidelines/ standards between substations	2.7	2
Fractured chain-of-command	3.5	3
Too much autonomy	3.6	4a
Budgetary issues	3.6	4b
Decreased departmental esprit de corps	5.1	6
Decrease in overall operational efficiency and effectiveness of department	5.6	7

Storefronts. Fourteen of the responding agencies utilized one or more storefronts. The Houston Police Department has the most with 25, one-third of which were implemented after 1990. Because of variation in utilization of the storefronts from department to department, there does not exist a clear pattern as to the rank of the officer-in-charge; i.e., some are headed by captains or other ranking officers, while some storefronts do not have any commander. Both storefronts and mobile storefronts, which are described next, are funded by a variety of means: police department budgets, private donations, grants, and in one instance, drug forfeiture monies.

Agencies Employing Storefronts

Houston, Dallas, El Paso, Austin, Fort Worth, San Antonio, Beaumont, Mesquite, Plano, LaMarque, Galveston, Odessa, Duncanville, and Texarkana Police Departments.

Percentage of Departments Which Provide Given Services in Storefronts

Community meetings	72%
Youth programs	64%
Training	21%
Administration	14%
Jail/lock-up	7%
Vehicle maintenance facilities	0
Records	0

Storefronts "make officers more accessible to the public." *Mesquite P.D. representative*

Rank-Ordered Advantages of Storefronts

Advantages	Weighted Average	Rank
Improved community relations	1.2	1
Increased officer attachment to community where he/she works	2.3	2
Increase in overall operational efficiency and effectiveness of department	3.8	3
Improved operational facilities	4.1	4
Increased officer morale	4.7	5
Improved response time	6.3	6
Improved lines of communication between patrol and CID	7.2	7
Decrease in disciplinary actions against officers	7.9	8
Increased longevity of patrol vehicles due to decreased mileage	8.0	9
Money savings	8.4	10

Rank-Ordered Disadvantages of Storefronts

Disadvantages	Weighted Average	Rank
Decrease in unity of command	3.1	1a
Budgetary issues	3.1	1b
Too much autonomy	3.2	3
Fractured chain-of-command	3.4	4
Conflicting operational guidelines/ standards between storefronts	4.1	5
Decreased departmental esprit de corps	5.5	6a
Decrease in overall operational efficiency and effectiveness of department	5.5	6b

Mobile storefronts. Seven departments surveyed utilize mobile storefronts, and the Odessa Police Department is currently researching the possibility of implementing one. Four of the mobile storefronts are commanded by a sergeant, and the remaining three departments utilize respectively a captain, lieutenant and an officer.

Agencies Employing Mobile Storefronts

Dallas, Austin, Fort Worth, San Antonio, Irving, Beaumont, and Mesquite Police Departments.

Percentage of Departments Which Provide Given Services in Mobile Storefronts

Youth programs	57%
Community meetings	57%
Crime analysis	28%
Training	14%
Administration	14%
Vehicle maintenance facilities	0
Records	0
Jail/lock-up	0

Mobile storefronts "provide flexibility so services can be delivered directly to high crime problem areas."
Dallas P.D. representative

Rank-Ordered Advantages of Mobile Storefronts

Advantages	Weighted Average	Rank
Improved community relations	1.0	1
Increased officer attachment to community where he/she works	2.1	2
Improved response time	4.0	3
Increased officer morale	5.0	4
Increase in overall operational efficiency and effectiveness of department	5.2	5
Improved operational facilities	5.4	6
Improved lines of communication between patrol and CID	6.0	7
Decrease in disciplinary actions against officers	6.5	8
Money savings	8.4	9
Increased longevity of patrol vehicles due to decreased mileage	8.5	10

Rank-Ordered Disadvantages of Mobile Storefronts

Disadvantages	Weighted Average	Rank
Budgetary issues	1.2	1
Decrease in unity of command	4.0	2a
Conflicting operational guidelines/ standards between mobile storefronts	4.0	2b
Too much autonomy	4.2	4
Fractured chain-of-command	4.5	5
Decrease in overall operational efficiency and effectiveness of department	5.2	6
Decreased departmental esprit de corps	5.6	7

Note—The Austin Police Department cited that "there are no disadvantages to mobile substations," and the San Antonio Police Department felt that "the greatest disadvantage is the result of the vehicles continually breaking down."



Decentralization in the El Paso Police Department

The City of El Paso

El Paso, with a population exceeding 550,000, is the fourth largest city in the state. Across the border lies Ciudad Juarez, Mexico with a population over 1,216,000. The City's corporate limits encompass 247 square miles. Standing under the shadows of the Franklin Mountains, which divide the city in half, El Paso enjoys the unique status of being located at the crossroads of two nations, with a rich history spanning at least four centuries.

The Police Department

Demographics. The 961 officer department (as of December, 1994) consists of individuals from all nationalities and walks-of-life. When recruiting prospective officers, the department attempts to mirror the ethnicity of its citizens in an attempt to create a closer working relationship between the two. As such, the department is heavily represented by Hispanic officers.

Crime Rates. In 1993, major crime in El Paso was reduced by 3.5 percent. In 1994, crime was down by 13.7 percent. This reduction is record breaking. The department's modern

recordkeeping process dates back to 1972, and this is the largest, single decrease on record for at least 23 years (Planning & Research 1995).

Community-Based Policing. Continuing change was brought to the El Paso Police Department in 1993 and 1994 as it moved ahead in its transition to the concept of Community-Based Policing. The ultimate goal is to make El Paso a competitive city, with safe streets, strong neighborhoods, and a thriving economy. The department's approach is reflected in a published philosophy statement:

Community-Based Policing is a philosophy and an organizational strategy that promotes a new partnership between people and their police. It is based on the premise that both the police and the community must work together to identify, prioritize, and solve contemporary problems such as crime, drugs, fear of crime, social and physical disorders, and overall neighborhood decay, with the goal of improving the overall quality of life in the area (Planning & Research 1995:14).



El Paso East Valley substation. Substations in El Paso only house Patrol Operations while Regional Commands are fully self-sufficient police facilities.

To accomplish this goal the department implemented its four "Cornerstones of Community-Based Policing," which are the basic premises that drive Community-Based Policing in the El Paso Police Department. The four "cornerstones" are: (1) Community Involvement, (2) Crime Analysis, (3) Problem Solving Approach, and (4) Call Management. "The ultimate goal is for optimum cooperation and respect between the police and the public; and that officers be viewed as being part of rather than apart from the community" (Community Services Division 1994:4).

Regional Command Concept. The department believes that community concerns differ from area to area, and from neighborhood to neighborhood. El Paso's geographical and cultural make-up is unique with the city actually containing many communities in one. It is because of this unique composition, that they have adopted the idea of developing a decentralized and personalized police approach.

In an effort to better accomplish this new mission, the department's organization structure has been reorganized and the Regional Command Facility Model has been developed. Under this Regional Command structure, the city will be divided into five regions—a central, east, west, northeast, and lower valley each containing its own Regional Command Station. All the Regional Command Stations will be fully capable of providing a complete array of police services, to include a criminal investigation unit. At this time, three substations' CID units work out of Central Headquarters Command. All homicide and white-collar offenses are currently, and will remain, investigated by Central Command detectives. The Records, Identification, Communications, Tactical, Internal Affairs, Narcotics, and Intelligence units, which are located in the Central facility, will remain centralized.

At present, the department has two, fully-operational Regional Command Centers located at the Central and Pebble Hills facilities, respectively. The current remaining three substations, which serve primarily as briefing rooms and temporary jail facilities, will be replaced by Regional Command Centers by the end of 1996. The following chart depicts current staffing levels for each command as of March 1995.

Crime Analysis Unit. The El Paso Police Department's Crime Analysis Unit began operation on January 3, 1995 after nearly a year of research and development. The unit is decentralized among five stations (two Regional Command Centers and three substations), with each command having at a minimum of one crime analyst. However, a central crime analysis unit exists for the continued purpose of research and development of new software and work products, and to provide direction and training to the decentralized analysts. The Central Crime Analysis Unit consists of

a supervisor, a systems analyst, and a crime analyst. The department does not utilize any civilian employees at this time; however, there are plans to implement one or more in the future.

El Paso Police Department Staffing

	Current Staffing
TOTALS	
Lieutenant	36
Sergeant	97
Detective	157
Officer	638
TOTAL	928
OFFICE OF CHIEF	
Chief	1
Assistant Chief	2
Deputy Chief	3
Captain	4
Sergeant	0
Detective	0
Officer	1
TOTAL	11
CENTRAL	
Captain	1
Lieutenant	6
Sergeant	15
Detective	13
Officer	149
TOTAL	184
EAST VALLEY	
Captain	1
Lieutenant	4
Sergeant	10
Officer	91
TOTAL	106
NORTHEAST	
Captain	1
Lieutenant	3
Sergeant	9
Officer	79
TOTAL	92
PEBBLE HILLS	
Captain	1
Lieutenant	5
Sergeant	12
Detective	13
Officer	92
TOTAL	123
WEST PATROL	
Captain	1
Lieutenant	3
Sergeant	8
Officer	63
TOTAL	75

Replacing Substations with Command Centers . . .



Photo of current Westside substation and future Westside Regional Command Center in background.

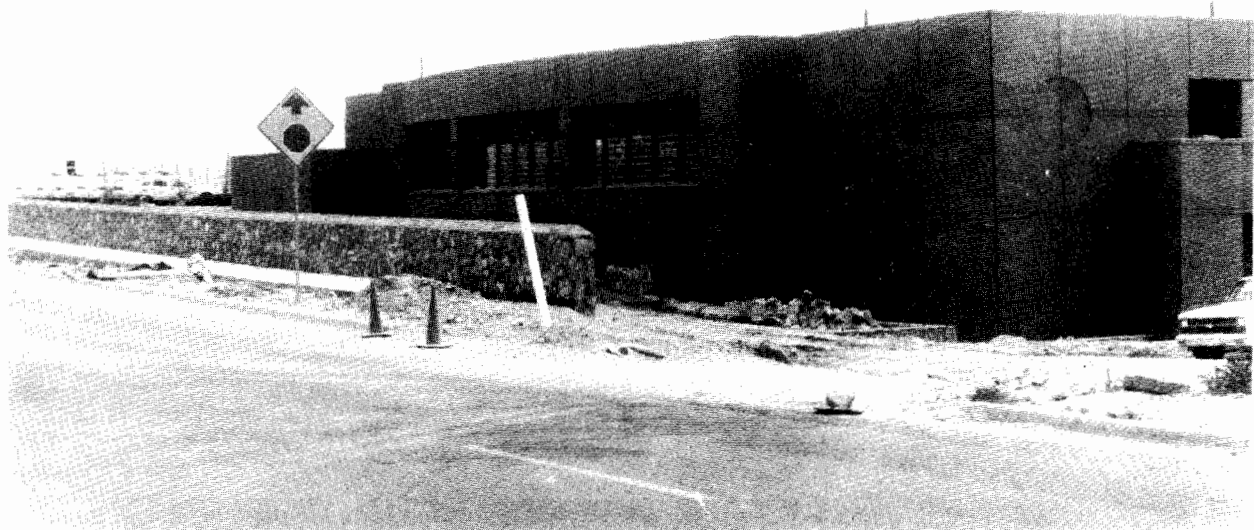


Photo of the new Westside Regional Command Center. Directly behind is the current Westside substation (white building). The Command Center is 25,000 sq. ft. as compared to the existing 5,000 sq. ft. substation.

The old and the new coexisting . . .



View of the front of the Central Regional Command Facility. This traditional building is located in the heart of downtown.



Front entrance to the Pebble Hills Regional Command Facility. The contemporary 25,000 sq. ft. structure houses patrol operations, detectives, police area representative officers, and civilian support staff. Facilities include a community room seating 100, available at no cost for neighborhood organization meetings.

—Photos courtesy of El Paso Police Department

The primary mission of the crime analysis unit is to assure that information is collected, analyzed, and distributed in a timely manner to accomplish the following: (1) patrol planning, (2) development of investigative leads, (3) support of SHOCAP Program, (4) support of crime prevention, and (5) administrative support. In short, the Crime Analysis Unit is one method by which the department more effectively utilizes its resources.

The method of data collection is direct entry by patrol officers and other Vax system users. The crime analysis module, master name file, etc., are used as long-term storage for the crime analysis unit. Data are then daily downloaded onto the hard disk in the file server and backed-up on a magnetic cartridge. Crime analysts at each station can then query the database which consists of the down-loaded data.

The Crime Analysis Unit is capable of producing 28 different types of reports, and other customized reports. The six reports that are generally produced on schedule, are: (1) Crime Analysis Entry Report, (2) Repeat Police Calls by Location, (3) Weekly Crime Summary, (4) Parole/Probation Bulletin, (5) Juvenile Investigation Section/SHOCAP Weekly Crime Summary, and the (6) Statistical Bulletin. Distribution is normally through the RMS Electronic Mail System unless photographic images are necessary in which hard-copy bulletins are prepared.

The department's Crime Analysis Unit is approximately 70 percent operational in terms of stated goals and expectations. For this reason, the department has of yet, not implemented a survey to evaluate the performance of the unit.

Additional Departments/Services. Although the following list is not exhaustive, it does contain the remainder of the primary departments and services which the El Paso Police Department utilizes. With the exception of those found in the Metro Section most departments/services will be located in each Regional Command Center.

Metro Section—Foot Patrol, Impact Detail (undercover assignments), The Bicycle Unit, Three-Wheeler/Parking Enforcement Controllers, and Traffic Enforcement Detail.

Operations—Community Services, Crime Prevention Unit, Storefront Operation, School Resource Officer, Public Information and Headquarters Building Security (the information desk is manned 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday with civilian volunteers), Safety Education, D.A.R.E., Gang Diversion Unit, Civilian Volunteer Program, Police Chaplain, Police Explorer Post, Internal Affairs, Planning & Research, Asset Forfeiture, Inspections, Court Liaison, Training, Crisis Management Team, Airport Detail and Support,

Bomb Squad, Canine Section, R.O.P., Pawnshop Detail, Crimes Against Persons, Forgery/Fugitive/Theft, Crime Stoppers Section, Auto Theft, Auto Theft Task Force, Special Investigations Group, and Juvenile investigation Section.

Functional Decentralization in El Paso

Services provided by the Headquarters (Central Command) only:

Foot Patrol Unit, Three Wheeler/Parking Enforcement Controllers, Public Information and Headquarters Building Security, Planning & Research, Asset Forfeiture, Inspections, Court Liaison, Records, Communications, Homicide Investigation, Auto Theft/Auto Theft Task Force, and Special Investigations Group (Narcotics and Vice/Intelligence).

Services provided by all Regional Commands:

Impact Detail (plain clothes officers), Traffic Enforcement Detail, Crime Prevention Unit, Storefront Operation (Regional Commander supervisors), School Resource Officer, Safety Education, D.A.R.E., Civilian Volunteer Program, All Detectives with the exception of Homicide, Repeat Offender Program, Pawnshop Detail, and Crime Stoppers Section.

These sections are housed in separate facilities:

Tactical Unit (Special Weapons and Tactics, Gang Diversion Unit and Bomb Squad), Airport Detail/Airport Support, Canine Section, and Juvenile Investigation Section (Child Abuse Unit, Status Offense Unit, Juvenile Delinquency Unit, and Serious Habitual Offender Comprehensive Action Program).

Other Services:

Bicycle Unit (Central and East Valley Regional Commands), Police Chaplain (a volunteer position consisting of three chaplains who are on-call for the entire department), Police Explorer Post (Police Academy; however, they ride with all Regional Commands), In-Service Training (Central and Pebble Hills Regional Commands).



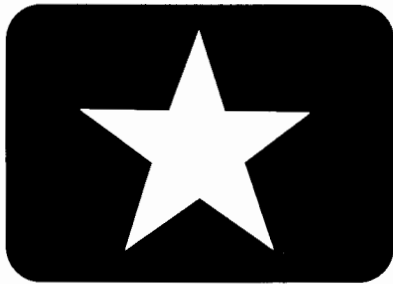
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Texas Police Agencies that responded to the survey

- Abilene Police Department
Addison Police Department
Amarillo Police Department
Arlington Police Department
Austin Police Department
Beaumont Police Department
Carrollton Police Department
College Station Police Department
Dallas County Sheriff's Department
Dallas Police Department
Deer Park Police Department
Duncanville Police Department
El Paso Police Department
Euless Police Department
Fort Bend County Sheriff's Department
Fort Worth Police Department
Galveston Police Department
Garland Police Department
Harris County Sheriff's Department
Houston Police Department
Irving Police Department
Jefferson County Sheriff's Department
LaMarque Police Department
Laredo Police Department
Lubbock Police Department
Mesquite Police Department
Midland Police Department
North Richland Hills Police Department
Odessa Police Department
Pasadena Police Department
Plano Police Department
Randall County Sheriff's Department
Richardson Police Department
San Antonio Police Department
Texarkana Police Department
Texas Department of Public Safety
Travis County Sheriff's Department
University of Texas at El Paso Police Department
Waco Police Department
White Settlement Police Department
Wichita Falls Police Department

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