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El Paso Drive-by Shooting Response Team Evaluation

Introduction

While the Kansas City Preventive Patrol experiment and other studies proved the fallacy of random, undirected patrol as a deterrent to crime, the San Diego Field Interrogation and the Kansas City Gun Reduction experiments provided evidence that intensive, targeted police activities could dramatically reduce crime (Hoover 1998). These and other targeted or crime-specific police activities have gained recognition in the 1990s. One example is the El Paso Police Department's Drive-by Shooting Response Team (DSRT) approach. In response to increasing numbers of drive-by shootings and gang activity, the DSRT was created in 1995 to rapidly identify and arrest suspects in gang-related crime.

Regional Demographics

El Paso is located in the westernmost tip of Texas, bordered by New Mexico to the north and Juarez, Mexico, to the south. The region has a combined population of approximately two million people. El Paso is predominantly Hispanic, representing 73% of the population, followed by whites (22%) and blacks (3%) (El Paso Police Department 1998).

Scope of El Paso's Gang Problem

The El Paso Police Department's Gang Investigative Section has identified 407 gangs in the metropolitan area. This includes street, prison and "tagging" (graffiti artists) gangs, estimated to be comprised of 6,295 members (male=5,733; female=562) (El Paso Police Department 1998). Most are local in origin, although there have been incursions by California- and Chicago-based gangs. El Paso's proximity to Mexico and the relatively inexpensive costs for drugs makes it a major conduit for drug trafficking into the United States and provides incentives for California- and Chicago-based gangs to move into the area. Chicago gang members have also entered the area through military assignments at nearby Fort Bliss. Due to extended families in both areas, many of

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the California-based gang members moved to El Paso either to escape the gang lifestyle or avoid prosecution. If unable to escape the lifestyle, many joined existing El Paso gangs or formed chapters of California gangs. Although the local Hispanic gangs tend to be smaller and neighborhood-based, they are involved in the majority of gang violence.

Prison gangs control most of the drug trafficking in the El Paso area. The fastest growing prison gang actively recruits street gang members as they pass through the El Paso County Jail. The El Paso Police Department's Gang Unit, in conjunction with the FBI Gang Task Force, aggressively investigates and prosecutes prison gang members.

Background

Due to escalating gang violence and crime in the late 1980s, the El Paso Police Department created a Gang Unit from their existing Tactical Section. In 1990, the Gang Unit was divided into Intelligence/Diversion, Investigations, and Enforcement that functioned under a centralized command. The Gang Unit responded on a call-out basis to drive-by shootings and other serious gang-related crimes, but only if a serious injury was reported. The Gang Unit was responsible for investigating all gang-related crimes, except murder, which the Crimes Against Person's Homicide Unit handled. For a time, this arrangement proved effective in reducing gang-related crime. In late 1993, however, the Crimes Against Persons Unit was given responsibility for investigating gang-related crimes, including drive-by shootings. They responded immediately only in the event of a life-threatening situation. Otherwise, a follow-up investigation was conducted after receiving the initial field reports. Gang-related incidents and drive-by shootings began to increase.

Drive-by Shooting Response Team

In May, 1995, the Drive-by Shooting Response Team was created as a quick-response-team to

attack gang crime and violence. The DSRT was comprised of members of the Investigation and Intelligence sections of the previous Tactical Section's Gang Unit who were assigned to the Juvenile Investigation Section (JIS). The Enforcement section, known as CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) units, were decentralized and placed under the authority of regional commanders.

Mission. The Gang Unit/DSRT's mission is to thoroughly investigate all gang-related crime in an effort to reduce community anxiety about gang violence. The unit also provides coordination within the various units of the El Paso Police Department and with outside agencies (i.e., probation, parole, courts) to combat the problem of gangs and gang violence.

Call-out criteria. The DSRT responds to drive-by shootings and serious gang-related incidents if the circumstances meet any one of the following criteria: there are injuries, there is serious property damage, the situation has the potential to escalate, there are good investigative leads, or the field supervisor at the scene deems it necessary (El Paso Police Department 1998). If a drive-by shooting results in a death, the case is handled by the Crimes Against Persons Homicide Unit, with the DSRT serving in a support capacity.

Call-out procedure. Whenever a drive-by or serious gang-related incident occurs, a CRASH unit is dispatched to the scene. If, however, a CRASH unit is unavailable, a regular patrol unit will respond. The first unit to arrive will "freeze" the scene, gather pertinent information, and ask Communications to notify the DSRT commander who, in turn, will determine if a call-out is warranted and, if so, how many DSRT members should respond to the scene. If a call-out is not necessary, the case is referred through normal departmental channels. The decision to call out DSRT members is based on the physical location of the scene and the number of victims, witnesses, and suspects.

El Paso is divided into five regional commands which are split and assigned to eight Gang Unit/DSRT members. The members assigned to the regional command where the incident takes place are the primary investigators on the case. Other Gang Unit/DSRT members are notified on a rotating basis. Along with the DSRT, at least one member of the Gang Unit Intelligence Section is notified. Once the DSRT arrives, they thoroughly investigate the case and free for duty as many patrol units as the situation allows. The goal is to make an arrest quickly to reduce possible retaliation by other gang members.

Gang unit personnel. The Gang Unit is part of the Juvenile Investigative Section and falls under the overall command of the Section lieutenant and immediate supervision of the Gang Unit/DSRT's sergeant. The Gang Investigation Section is comprised of eight investigators, while the Gang Intelligence Section has four investigators, one civilian staff member and one volunteer worker.

Personnel selection. Members of the DSRT are recruited from the Gang Unit's Investigation and Intelligence Sections. Criteria to become a Gang Unit member include four year's experience as a police officer, above average performance evaluations, strong report writing and communications skills, strong interview and interrogation skills, strong conflict resolution and creative problem solving skills, high level of self-motivation, and a working knowledge of area gangs (El Paso Police Department 1998).

The Drive-by Shooting Response Team continuously participates in gang conferences and are trained on the most current issues of gang enforcement. The DSRT members also educate patrol officers, other law enforcement agencies, public service agencies, school administrators, and adolescents to identify gang members and gang-related symbols, expressions and dress.

Success of the DSRT

The overall success of the DSRT is attributed first to the administration and department's acknowledgment of the seriousness of the problem of gang violence. Without the administration's backing and support, the DSRT would have been "just another program." The department's unlimited overtime allows the DSRT to work a case from the initial call-out to the investigative conclusion. Most DSRT arrests occur within 24 hours.

A second key to success is the excellent working relationship between the patrol/CRASH units and the DSRT. With training provided by the department, the first responding unit can determine if an incident is gang-related and thus "freeze" the scene. This, combined with a fast response time, allows the DSRT to interview witnesses, victims, complainants and suspects before they have a chance to leave the scene, thus dramatically increasing the chances of arresting a suspect and clearing the case.

A third important element is the cooperation between the Gang Unit/DSRT and other agencies. Two Gang Unit Intelligence investigators are assigned to FBI gang task forces in the region. The Gang Unit/DSRT has established good working relationships with local prosecutors, judges and other members of El Paso's justice system.

A critical factor to the DSRT's success is their ability to connect with gang members. While their goal is to eliminate gangs, members of the DSRT have developed an excellent rapport with various gang members. During a call-out, DSRT members treat their "guests" with the respect that gang members expect, without compromising interrogations to obtain necessary information. The Drive-by Shooting Response Team's ability to connect, combined with an intimate knowledge of the gangs and gang members, is probably the most important reason for the program's success.

Drive-by Shooting Response Team Clearance Rates

| | May-Dec. 1995 | Jan.-Dec. 1996 | Jan.-Dec. 1997 | Jan.-Aug. 1998 | TOTAL |
|------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------|
| DRST Call-outs | 44 | 75 | 46 | 18 | 183 |
| DRST Call-outs Cleared | 37 | 68 | 45 | 16 | 166 |
| DSRT Arrests | 82 | 119 | 68 | 24 | 293 |
| DSRT Clearance Rate | 84% | 91% | 98% | 91% | |

Three-Year Clearance Rate=91%

Arrests Per Cleared Case=1.5

Clearances: Call-Outs vs. Non-Call-Outs

| | May-Dec. 1995 | Jan.-Dec. 1996 | Jan.-Dec. 1997 | Jan.-Aug. 1998 | TOTAL |
|----------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Non-DSRT | | | | | |
| Drive-by Shootings | 118 | 91 | 70 | 23 | 302 |
| Drive-by Shootings Cleared | 48 | 18 | 21 | 5 | 92 |
| Drive-by Clearance Rate | 41% | 20% | 30% | 22% | 30% |
| DSRT | | | | | |
| Drive-by Shootings | 44 | 75 | 46 | 18 | 183 |
| Drive-by Shootings Cleared | 37 | 68 | 45 | 16 | 166 |
| Drive-by Clearance Rate | 84% | 91% | 98% | 89% | 91% |
| Total Shootings Per Year | 162 | 166 | 116 | 41 | 485 |
| Total Per Year Cleared | 85 | 86 | 66 | 21 | 258 |
| Overall Clearance Rate | 52% | 52% | 57% | 51% | 53% |



Finally is the dedication of the DSRT members to the Gang Unit. The willingness to “go the extra mile” on each case helps to ensure a high clearance rate in call-outs. By possessing a strong sense of esprit de corps, unit cohesion and dedication, the DSRT continues to operate successfully.

Future of the DSRT

With a declining number of drive-by shootings, the DSRT has succeeded in its primary mission to reduce the amount of gang violence. Not only has the DSRT been extremely successful in solving gang-related crimes, it has also helped solve other serious crimes such as burglary and robbery even though a definitive gang presence was not noted. Because of the link between gangs and serious crime, along with its proven success, the DSRT’s mission may expand to include other serious crimes, excluding murder.

Other Gang-Related Initiatives of the El Paso Police Department

The gang-related initiatives of the El Paso Police Department are divided into investigation/enforcement and prevention/education/intervention categories.

Investigation/enforcement initiatives. The Community Resistance Against Street Hoodlums units are the uniformed, proactive enforcement arm of the El Paso Police Department’s gang initiative. These units aggressively patrol gang areas and utilize a zero-tolerance policy regarding gang activity. When on duty, the CRASH units are the primary first responders to gang-related calls, thus freeing other patrol units for non-gang-related calls-for-service. CRASH units also patrol around El Paso’s schools to prevent gang incidents. Each of the CRASH units consists of one sergeant and four to six officers.

Another initiative is El Paso’s curfew ordinance passed in 1991 to reduce juvenile criminal activities as well as their victimization. This ordinance

holds the parent more responsible for their children’s activities.

The Serious Habitual Offenders Comprehensive Action Program (SHOCAP) is a multi-agency program consisting of school officials, representatives of the Texas Youth Commission, county attorney’s office, juvenile probation department, and the El Paso Police Department. SHOCAP is designed to closely monitor the activities of selected serious habitual juvenile offenders. Candidates for SHOCAP must be a juvenile at least 10 but less than 17 years old, have a record of three or more felony or misdemeanor arrests, and have been previously adjudicated.

Crime Stoppers is another initiative that offers rewards for tips leading to the arrest and indictment of felony offenders. The program also offers rewards for information regarding graffiti and tagging offenses.

Prevention/education/intervention initiatives.

A Police Area Representative (PAR) officer is assigned to each of the patrol districts in the five regional commands. They are responsible for addressing the problems and complaints of citizens and officers to prevent quality-of-life issues from becoming police issues. PARs are also trained to assist and educate the public in gang-related issues.

School Resource Officers (SROs) work in conjunction with the two school districts in El Paso. They are placed in the middle schools and provide training on drug abuse and gang awareness issues. They also provide counseling, police services and interaction with students, faculty and parents. Additionally, SROs give gang presentations to interested parties.

The Youth Initiative Program (YIP) is a partnership between law enforcement and community agencies. The primary purpose of this program is to identify gang-infested areas, develop plans to address the problems of these areas and find resources necessary to eliminate the problems.

Conclusion

The Drive-by Shooting Response Team of the El Paso Police Department has been successful in reducing the number of drive-by shootings in their jurisdiction. This success is the result of a combination of factors, including but not limited to, the support of the administration, the dedication and ability of DSRT members to "connect" with gang members, and inter-agency and intra-agency cooperation. The DSRT is a key part of the integrated approach utilized by the El Paso Police Department to combat gangs and gang violence. This approach should continue to prove effective in the future.

References

- Hoover, L. T., Editor. (1998). *Police Program Evaluation*. Police Executive Research Forum. Washington, D.C.
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Thank you to the members of the Gang Investigative Section, the Mission Valley CRASH Unit and the administration of the El Paso Police Department.

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Ms. Jacklyn Merchant
Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas
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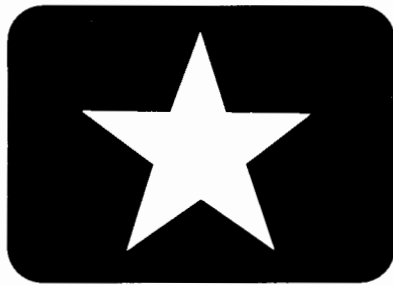
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Sam Houston State University
Larry T. Hoover, Ph.D., Director
Jamie L. Tillerson, Program Manager

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This bulletin was authored by Mr. Scott A. Pray, a doctoral teaching fellow at Sam Houston State University. Mr. Pray received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Western Illinois University and has served as a corporate security officer, a juvenile detention home counselor, a probation officer, a police officer, and a chief of police. His research interests include policing and firearm control policies.

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**Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement
Management Institute of Texas**

Criminal Justice Center
Sam Houston State University
Huntsville, TX 77341-2296

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