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Evaluating the Task Force Model

The "war on drugs" in the 1980s gave rise to a growth in law enforcement task forces with the sole mission of controlling drug crime. This was during a time when many federal, state and local police entities were implementing the task force model to confront issues such as terrorism, gang activity and corruption of public officials. The Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988 provided federal discretionary and formula grant funds to local and state criminal justice agencies to expand drug enforcement efforts in their communities (McGarrell & Schlegel, 1993). As more than half of the funds were used to create over 800 multi-jurisdictional drug task forces, there was a break from the traditional drug enforcement strategies that were developed and implemented within individual police agencies. Much of past research that has examined the effectiveness of multi-jurisdictional task forces has been descriptive in nature and allows little extrapolation to conclude whether these task forces are worth the large amount of federal funding (Coldren & McGarrell, 1993).

Although the task force model has been utilized for numerous categories ranging from organized to hate crimes, most of the literature concerning the evaluation of this model focuses on anti-drug efforts. The goals of these task forces are to increase coordination and

communication among law enforcement agencies, allow drug enforcement units to cross jurisdictional boundaries, and ultimately to increase the effectiveness of law enforcement efforts against drug transport, distribution and use (Ruboy & Coldren, 1992). Due to the sensitive nature of the work conducted by most task forces, information published in an open forum is difficult to obtain with the exception of drug task forces funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance.

The Bureau of Justice Assistance has been the largest advocator of evaluating the task force model and has produced numerous guidelines and studies for examining the efficiency of these models. However, few studies have explored the perceptual aspect of the task force model by analyzing data from local police agencies, the largest human resource investors in task forces. The purpose of this *Bulletin* is to fill that gap through survey information gathered from Texas municipal law enforcement agencies.

Method

A survey instrument was constructed to measure the extent of an agency's participation in multi-jurisdictional task forces and attitudes about the value and/or problems generated by that participation. Twenty-

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nine municipal police agencies within the state of Texas responded to the survey.

In developing the survey, the problems inherent in survey research was an area of concern. First, an individual's memory is highly dependent on his or her perception of the events that took place, and the codification of such events into memory is conditional on many factors, not the least of which is the significance placed on the event. Second, if survey data alone is utilized, there is no way to verify the accuracy of the answers. Finally, the *TELEMASP* point of contact for each police department is likely the individual who answered the survey questions, and that person's attitude about task forces may not be representative of the agency. However, it is important to note that all of the individuals who responded to the survey were management level with a mean of 22 years of policing experience.

Results

Participation in task forces. Respondents were asked to indicate if they participated in 12 types of task force operations. However, the ATF Achilles Heel, FBI organized crime and hate crime task forces were eliminated because none of the surveyed agencies maintained personnel within these areas. Table 1 shows the breakdown of involvement in each activity. Nineteen of the departments operate a multi-jurisdictional drug task force, followed by a high intensity drug task force representing 13 agencies, and 9 agencies had an organized crime drug enforcement task force. This supports the proposition that drug task forces remain the most popular among municipal departments. The next most populated task force, represented by six agencies, was the FBI's violent offender task force, and four departments participate in a FBI terrorist task force.

The average length of assignment to a task force was 3.8 years with a minimum of two and a maximum of seven years. When asked how long an officer should serve on a task force, the mean number of years respondents indicated was 3.57 with a minimum of two and a maximum of five years. Therefore, it may

be concluded that the amount of time considered appropriate for an officer to stay in a task force does not deviate significantly from current practices. Only 11 of the surveyed agencies had a rotation policy for multi-jurisdictional operations.

Perception of task force effectiveness. To determine whether municipal law enforcement agencies perceive the task force model as being effective, the total number of task forces that each agency participated in was computed and then correlated with responses to the question: "How effective have task forces been in addressing the crime control needs of your community?" Respondents were asked to answer "very successful," "somewhat successful," or "not very successful." As shown in Figure 1, 12 (41%) of the police departments felt that the task forces have been very successful, 11 (38%) considered them somewhat successful, and 6 (20%) departments judged the task forces as not very successful.

Although the majority of respondents were positive about the task force model's successfulness, the question remains whether there is a relationship between perception of task force success and the amount of involvement for each agency. In addition, the number of task forces each agency is involved in and their effectiveness were correlated with a series of questions on perceived improvement as a result of the task forces. This was derived by asking how the following areas have changed since the agency's involvement in task forces, ranked by "improved," "unchanged," "worse," or "don't know":

1. Communication among law enforcement agencies in my area;
2. Cooperation among state and local enforcement agencies;
3. Cooperation among federal and state task forces;
4. Duplication of investigative efforts;
5. Cooperation between officers and prosecutors; and
6. Police-community relations.

Table 1
Number of Agencies in Each Type of Task Force

Type of Task Force	Agency Involved in Task Force	
	Yes	No
Multi-jurisdictional drug task force (MJTF)	19 (65.5%)	10 (34.5%)
High intensity drug task force (HIDTA)	13 (44.8%)	16 (55.2%)
Organized crime drug enforcement task force (OCDETF)	9 (31.0%)	20 (69.0%)
FBI violent offenders	6 (20.7%)	23 (79.3%)
Terrorist task force	4 (13.8%)	25 (86.2%)
FBI property crimes	3 (10.3%)	26 (89.7%)
FBI gang task force	3 (10.3%)	26 (89.7%)
ATF violent crime	2 (6.9%)	27 (93.1%)
FBI innocent images	1 (3.4%)	28 (96.6%)

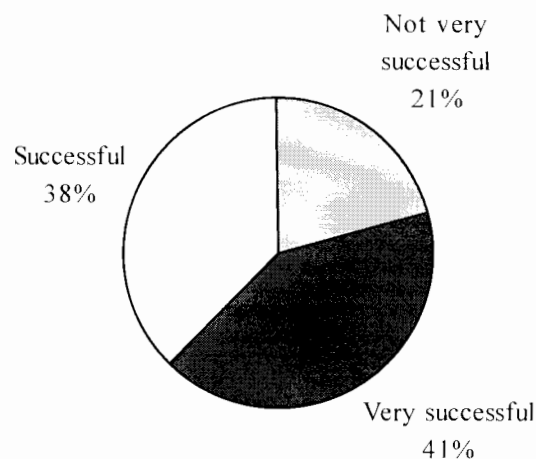


Figure 1. How effective have task forces been in addressing the crime control needs of your community?

A relationship did exist between how the respondent perceived the effectiveness of task forces and improvements in communication, cooperation and duplication of investigative efforts as a result of the task forces. In other words, as the perceived level of effectiveness of task forces increased, more improvement in communication and cooperation between municipal police departments and the community were also identified. However, no relationship was indicated between the amount of agency involvement in task forces and perceptions of task force effectiveness. It is also notable that the relationship between level of participation in task forces and the communication and cooperation variables were marginal.

Training of task force personnel. One of the most notable qualities of the task force model is that it provides supplemental training to police officers from different departments. In most cases, smaller departments do not have the funding to provide specialized training in areas such as undercover narcotics and investigation of terrorism cases. It is believed that the quality of training provided by task forces is significantly related to whether they are considered successful. This concept was

operationalized using variables derived from the following survey items: (1) rank order advantages of loaning officers to task forces; (2) evaluation of task force officer training; and (3) whether lack of training of task force officers is an issue.

As Table 2 shows, the surveyed agencies considered the training of task force members to be a benefit to participation. Approximately 83% evaluated the training to be excellent or good. In addition, over half of the municipal police departments considered the increase in officer training as a result of task force involvement as a great advantage. Lack of training was determined not to be an issue by nearly 83% of the surveyed agencies. Therefore, it may be postulated that task forces provide quality training to police officers as a result of participation. However, it is important to address how this quality training relates to perceptions of task force effectiveness, reduction of grant monies and level of participation. These variables were used as measures of task force successfulness.

Quality of task force training did not appear to be related to perceptions of successfulness, except between effectiveness of task forces and evaluation of



Table 2
Training of Task Force Personnel

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Evaluation of officer training			
Excellent	16	55.2	55.2
Good	8	27.6	82.8
Average	5	17.2	100.0
Total	29	100.0	
Officers gain increased training			
Greatest advantage	6	20.7	20.7
Great advantage	10	34.5	55.2
Advantage	11	37.9	93.1
Least advantage	2	6.9	100.0
Total	29	100.0	
Lack of training is an issue			
Serious issue	1	3.4	3.4
Occasional issue	4	13.8	17.2
Not an issue	24	82.8	100.00
Total	29	100.0	

officer training. The significance level indicated that the more effective task forces were considered, the higher the evaluation of officer training. It may be concluded that although police departments are overall content with task force training, this aspect bears little significance on whether the task force is considered effective, the level of participation by municipal departments and whether grant monies for task forces should be reduced.

Increases in communication as a result of task forces. Communication among task force participants and their sponsoring agencies, other responsible officials, and components of the criminal justice system is critical to not only task forces, but any law enforcement agency. These task forces not only pool together resources but they also increase cooperation among different police departments as a result of joint training and investigations. Most administrative and

management theorists agree that communication and cooperation between police departments is improved through multi-agency efforts. The frequencies of responses exemplified in Table 3 illustrate the significance of increased communication gained through task force participation. Respondents felt that the task force model had a significant positive impact on communication and cooperation among police agencies. Over 86% of the surveyed agencies considered increases in cooperation and communication as an advantage, and almost 62% considered those increases a great advantage. In addition, task forces were also considered responsive on requests for information. Over 86% of the participating law enforcement agencies believed requests for information regarding intelligence were met with a response. Finally, 70% of the respondents felt that increasing communication among agencies should be the highest priority.



Table 3

Increases in Communication Among Police Agencies

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Cooperation and connections are increased			
Greatest advantage	10	34.5	34.5
Great advantage	8	27.6	62.1
Advantage	7	24.1	86.2
Least advantage	4	13.8	100.0
Total	29	100.0	
Requests for information regarding task force participation			
Very responsive	20	69.0	69.0
Somewhat responsive	8	27.6	96.6
Don't know	1	3.4	100.0
Total	29	100.0	
Requests for information regarding personnel			
Very responsive	23	79.3	79.3
Somewhat responsive	6	20.7	100.0
Total	29	100.0	
Intelligence gathering			
Very responsive	15	51.7	51.7
Somewhat responsive	10	34.5	86.2
Not adequately responsive	3	10.3	96.6
Don't know	1	3.4	100.0
Total	29	100.0	
Task forces increase communication among agencies			
High	19	65.5	70.4
Medium	6	20.7	92.6
Low	1	3.4	96.3
Don't know	1	3.4	100.0
Missing	2	6.9	
Total	29	100.0	



Effectiveness of task forces was correlated with every communication variable. This indicates as the effectiveness of task forces was perceived as greater, the greater the perception of improvement in communication and cooperation among participating agencies. In addition, many of the respondents who felt there should be no reduction in grant monies also considered communication between departments in certain categories as vastly improved. Level of participation was not significant with the communication variables, which may indicate that participation in task forces has more to do with available resources and manpower rather than consideration of communication improvements.

Conclusion

For any task force, there is most likely a different method to assess its effectiveness. The basic problem remains that no measurable standard can be applied to every task force that will yield consistent results on effectiveness and conclusively demonstrate the impact of these task forces. Use of arrest data, amount of asset forfeitures, prosecution rates, and amount of drugs seized have all been used in the past as measures of task force effectiveness. However, the diversity of task force missions and program objectives across different geographic regions has precluded effective measurement of task force success using the aforementioned data. Therefore, the most logical measurement of effectiveness should come from those agencies that have an investment of resources and manpower in the task forces.

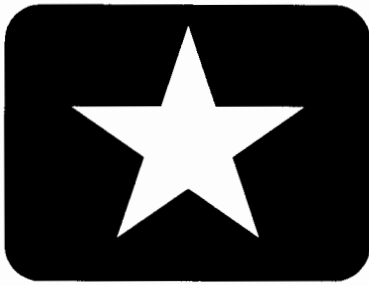
Sharing information can facilitate services, reinforce the roles of various participants, improve decision-making and feedback, and provide the opportunity for task force members to become acquainted with each other both formally and informally (Slayton, 2000). In addition, once representatives from each participating agency become accustomed to each other, the working relationship improves, and the individual "turf" considerations diminish as the task force investigations progress (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1998).

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