

ABSTRACT: Problem Oriented Policing - A Complex Problem Addressed in Washington, D. C.

Scanning - A diverse pool of groups were used in the identification of the problems, to include police, the community, housing inspectors, and Assistant United States Attorneys. The results were the identification of many problems.

Analysis - In the analysis step drugs, physical and social disorder were major causes of the conditions present at the location. A successful effort would involve not only the police but a number of other agencies.

Response - Brainstorming sessions were held to develop responses. The goal was to reduce the level of drug dealing and improve the quality of life for the law abiding residents. A wide variety of tactics on the law enforcement side were employed as well as creative use of other agencies.

Assessment - Activities of the police and the other governmental agencies were tracked. Tactics were very productive. The drug problem was reduced and the disorder problems were abated.

Visual improvements were evident. Independent survey results confirmed the assessment.

## PROBLEM ORIENTED POLICING - A COMPLEX PROBLEM ADDRESSED IN WASHINGTON, D. C.

The 1500 and 1600 blocks of Levis Street are a two block long area located in Northeast Washington, D.C. It falls within the graphical confines of the Fifth Police District. This residential neighborhood has historically experienced high levels of social and physical disorder, drug dealing and moderate levels of crime. The problems had always been dealt with traditionally. Reacting in response to calls for service, periodic sweeps by uniform officers, occasional directed patrol, and vice operations were conducted from time to time. It was agreed by all officers working the area that the area needed immediate, comprehensive, and innovative treatment. In early 1997 it was decided that a Problem Oriented Policing approach would be implemented in this neighborhood.

### Scanning

Since the number of potential problems was so great, it was felt that a diverse pool of groups would be most successful in the identification of all the community's problems. The scout car officers and beat sergeant assigned to that area were queried. Narcotics and Special Investigations Unit of the Metropolitan Police as well as the Fifth District Vice Unit were brought in. The United States Attorney's Office (prosecutors for Washington, D.C.), housing inspectors, and members of the community were all involved in identifying neighborhood problems.

While drug dealing was the most serious problem, many others were identified. The public streets in the area were filled with abandoned vehicles or cars without proper registration. Groups of undesirables were congregating in the area, drinking, selling drugs or engaging in disorderly behavior. Businesses in the area contributed to the blight with trash and debris and contributed to the drug operations by selling items conducive to drug dealing. Vacant lots in the area were overflowing with trash and debris, and many of the alleys were clogged with dumped trash. The area of 16th and Levis had the highest incidence of recovered stolen autos in the Fifth District. Many of these cars were stripped prior to recovery. Illegal parking and parking by non-residents prevented people who lived in the neighborhood from parking near their homes. The general conditions experienced in the neighborhood frightened the law abiding citizens who lived there.

## Analysis

In the analysis of the drug dealing by those involved in the scanning step a large amount of information came to light. Predominately, marijuana, with some crack cocaine was, being sold at 16th and Levis Streets, NE, almost 24 hours a day. The Levis Street Crew was responsible for the bulk of it and some members of the gang resided in the neighborhood. Stashes were regularly being recovered (10 to 50 bags) concealed in the trash on the lots adjacent to the street. In recovering the stashes from the trash and debris, a number of empty packages were found with the address cut out that were similar to the size and type that officers had seen in other investigations where the drugs had been mailed in via UPS, Federal Express or the US Mail. This led to the belief that the delivery system in the area may be by the mail. Many of the buyers who

purchased the drugs were from Maryland and Virginia. During the analysis step the question was raised why out of jurisdiction residents came all the way into this neighborhood to buy marijuana. Based on previous arrests and seizures it was found that the drugs sold were of high quality and each bag contained a large quantity. The buyers were receiving a large quantity of high quality drugs for their money. Further analysis revealed an attractive traffic pattern. Sixteenth and Levis Streets is a short distance and quick travel time from Route 295 and Route 50. Route 295 is a major artery from Virginia into the city and Route 50 is a major artery into the city from Maryland. Levis Street is one way west, 16th Street is one way north and the exit, Meigs Street is one way east. So it was found that the area had easy access and once into the neighborhood it was a circle of three blocks to get in, purchase the drugs, and get out before heading home. The drug sales were conducted on the street. The duration of the sale was short, easy in and easy out. The exposure time to the negative aspects of purchasing drugs was low and exposure to potential law enforcement efforts was low. The search time for the drugs was minimal.

Several of the businesses were creating or contributing to neighborhood problems. Two businesses involved in car sales were storing junked cars on their lots and storing unregistered cars on the street creating an eyesore and leaking fluids. Two other businesses were found to be selling plastic bags used in the street level drug sales.

The inconsistent enforcement efforts used in the area failed to prevent the congregating of undesirables, depositing of litter, and the public consumption of alcohol and its accompanying disorderly behavior. The obstructed alleys prevented police vehicles from a stealthy approach when attempting apprehensions. The number of illegally parked cars prevented the residents from

parking near their residence and camouflaged the dumped stolen cars that were being stripped.

All these conditions created fear in the law abiding residents of the neighborhood.

In the analysis step it was concluded that a comprehensive effort was going to be needed. This effort was not just going to involve the police but also other city agencies. The Department of Transportation, Department of Public Works, the D.C. Regulatory Agency, and the United States Attorney's Office were some of the outside resources that were identified.

## Response

In developing responses to the identified problems, numerous brainstorming sessions were held with the same groups that identified the problems. The goal was to reduce the level of drug dealing and improve the quality of life for the law abiding residents. The plan called for a wide variety of tactics on the law enforcement side and bringing in a number of other city agencies.

In attacking the drug dealing, an in depth covert investigation was initiated by a squad of investigators from the Narcotics and Special Investigations Division. This was the only group of officers dedicated full time to the area. Their strategy would involve observations posts, undercover buys and other investigative techniques necessary to secure arrest and search warrants for those involved in the drug dealing at both the street level and at higher levels of the organization.

While the squad of investigators worked on the supply side of the drug problem, it was felt that treatment on the demand side could be beneficial, based on the customer's profile. Many of the customers were coming from out of jurisdiction to purchase marijuana. They were not hard core addicts. If their risk could be substantially raised by coming into the area, they would seek another source or drop out altogether. A plan to conduct reverse buys was developed. Reverse buys involves police officers posing as drug sellers offering fake marijuana for sale. When the buyer exchanges cash for the fake drugs, they are arrested and charged with attempt possession. This tactic was discussed with the United States Attorney's Office who agreed with the charge and the tactic but would not go forward in prosecuting the buyers. This was acceptable in that it was felt that the arrest alone would serve as a deterrent for the buyers who had never been exposed to the criminal justice system, with the word spreading that it was too risky to go to the area to purchase marijuana. This tactic had been used before but only a few times in a location. The plan was to use the tactic several times a week, every week, so the deterrent effect would have duration.

In addressing the social disorder problems, a number of responses were planned. It was felt that the comfort level of those involved in the social disorder problems was high. If direct police contact could be increased, the area would lose its attractiveness to them. Police contacts ( by way of checking names, addresses and questioning) would put them face to face with an officer. Road blocks would check permit and vehicle status of those coming into the area. Zero tolerance enforcement would put a stop to the consumption of alcohol in public and reduce accompanying litter. Aggressive patrol and intensive traffic enforcement would cause officers to interact with drug sellers and users. All these activities would give the officers a heightened sense of who the

players were in the neighborhood and make the environment uncomfortable for the law violators. Levis Street would be periodically blocked off, interrupting the flow of traffic. Often the number of officers available to service the area was just one. For one officer to clear the block alone they were given a camera. Once on the scene they would step out of the car and start taking pictures or feign taking pictures.

In the analysis step it was found that stashes were being concealed in the trash strewn lots, so it was imperative that they be cleaned. The Department of Public Works was contacted to accomplish that task.

The abandoned vehicles needed to be towed so the Department of Transportation was contacted for assistance. <sup>x</sup>

The Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs was contacted to help with the inspections of the problem businesses and to help secure any vacant properties that may be found open.

In the analysis step it was found that the intersection of 16th and Levis had easy access to the buyers. Since the 1600 block of Levis was a one way street west bound, changing it to one way east bound could disrupt the traffic pattern, thereby forcing buyers to locate a new route and subsequently increasing their exposure to the risks of purchasing drugs, reduce convenience and increase the search time.

To discourage the stashing of drugs in the lots it was planned to bring in a narcotics dog to

periodically sweep the area to make recoveries.

All these efforts would also reduce the level of fear in the law abiding residents of the neighborhood.

### Assessment

This Problem Oriented Policing project was kicked off during the first week of March 1997.

The results of the first reverse buy operation was certainly eye opening. It was started at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and in 45 minutes, 20 arrests had been made and the operation had to be shut down due to manpower considerations; the arrests had to be processed. In subsequent operations typewriters, evidence envelopes and accompanying forms were taken to the scene and much of the required paperwork was completed in the alley right off the intersection of 16th and Levis. The look of shock and disbelief on the faces of those arrested was incredible. It was anticipated that some of the dealers would start warning potential buyers of the operation.

This problem was discussed with a Assistant United States Attorney and it was agreed that those participating in that conduct could and would be arrested for Assault on a Police Officer. Under the D. C. Criminal Code anyone impeding or interfering with a police officer can be charged with APO. While the AUSA did not intend to go forward with prosecution, it did solve the immediate problem. As of June 1, 1997, nearly 100 persons have been arrested and charged with attempt possession. As the operations have progressed arrest numbers have declined, showing that the word has spread and this tactic has been effective. As a side note, in discussions with the AUSA working the covert distribution aspect, the number of arrests of the buyers shows the level of

trafficking conducted in the area and adds to the prosecution of a conspiracy case against the gang operating the ring.

The attention directed to the area using the broad range of police tactics has netted the following as of June 1, 1997: Road blocks resulted in 26 traffic arrests. Aggressive patrol resulted in 11 felony arrests and 11 misdemeanor arrests. Zero tolerance enforcement resulted in 29 order maintenance arrests and 20 arrests for alcohol violations. Over 400 field interrogations have been conducted. Over 500 tickets have been issued as a result of intensive traffic enforcement. The tactic of having a single officer clear the area with a camera proved very successful. On every occasion it was used it never failed to quickly disperse those hanging in the area. During the infrequent times when groups have gathered, all it took was one unit driving into the area to cause the crowd to walk but of the area.

The tactic of periodically blocking the roadway proved ineffective. The plan was to block the roadway when officers were not working the area. Wooden or metal barricades were unavailable so plastic police line tape was run across the street. The tape did not last long, and it was undetermined who tore it down.

As stated previously, the level of trash and debris in the area was incredible. Several adjoining lots were piled high with literally thousands of bottles. Several alleys were blocked to the point where they were impassable by car. The Department of Public Works was contacted for help, and they joined the effort. On their first operation they cleaned all the public areas and brought in a street sweeper. The second operation brought in more trucks, and all the vacant lots were

cleared of the tons of trash, bottles, and discarded household items. The response to the request was swift so this task was accomplished early in the operation.

Early in the operation the Department of Transportation was asked for help. Within the first week they showed up one day with four cranes and towed 21 cars out of the area. The removal of the cars and the cleaning of the area made an incredible visible transformation in the area. In removing the unlicensed and abandoned cars, the dumping of stolen cars problem was solved. In the past three months, only two stolen cars have been found in the area, and they were not stripped.

The deployment of a narcotics dog prior to the cleaning proved ineffective. The amount and variety of debris on the lots, where stashes had previously been recovered, interrupted the dog's ability to identify odors emanating from the drugs.

In the analysis step it was felt that several of the businesses in the area were significant contributors to the physical disorder in the area and drug dealing. The building inspector who had been working with the Fifth District on other problems came in on this project. One of the businesses in the area was a fenced in car lot where many cars in various states of disrepair were stored, and junked parts were strewn about. During the first inspection the building inspector brought in inspectors from the Fire Department and the Department of Public Works. The owner was issued \$3,000 in civil fines for creating a hazardous condition, gas and oil on the ground, not having a permit for auto salvage, no certificate of occupancy, improperly installed water heater and performing construction without a permit. Further investigation on this business revealed that

the property was leased to the owner by McDonald's Corporation. McDonald's Corporation was contacted and it was explained to them what was taking place at the property and the efforts of the police department to reclaim the neighborhood for the residents. Within four days a corporate representative showed up at the police station and promised to initiate eviction proceedings immediately. Another property that was a grocery store which sold cars was cited for electrical work without a permit, displaying signs without a permit, construction without a permit and having a pay telephone without a permit. They were issued \$3,500 in fines. This business had many cars in varying conditions parked on the street without tags and offered for sale. The area surrounding this business was littered with junk and trash. When the owner was asked how he could take advantage of the neighborhood like this, he answered by saying " the people who live here are used to it." This indifference struck a cord in the officers and inspector who were present. Two variety stores in the area were inspected and received a total of \$2,300 in fines. One of the variety stores was found to be selling crack bags, and thousands were subsequently surrendered to the police.

In the analysis step, the easy access to the location of the drug sales was identified. The Department of Transportation cooperated and their response was quick. The 1600 block of Levis Street that had been one way westbound was changed to one way eastbound. This foiled the easy in, easy out route used by most of the buyers.

The SARA model in Problem Oriented Policing is not linear. While the steps are there to be followed, one can always return to the previous step. That was done in the assessment step. During this process new responses were identified and implemented.

In an effort to reduce the violence in the area, detectives assigned to the Fifth District targeted the area. Their investigations resulted in obtaining four search warrants and seven arrest warrants involving violent suspects who frequented or lived in the area. All the search warrants were executed, and three of the arrest warrants were served. Two arrests were made for assault with a deadly weapon - gun, and one arrest was made for assault with intent to kill.

The word was slowly getting out about the reverse buy operations and the risk of arrest in purchasing drugs in the area. To enhance this effort in dealing with the demand side and heighten the awareness of the buyers coming into the area, a 30 x 30 inch sign was developed for posting in the area which read, **WARNING -PERSONS COMING MTO THIS AREA TO BUY DRUGS ARE SUBJECT TO ARREST AND SEIZURE OF THEIR VEHICLE.** An important part of this tactic was that grant funds were identified to purchase the signs, and the vendor who received the contract was a neighborhood business.

It was felt that with all the changes taking place in the community it was a good time to bring the police and the area children closer together. A vendor was found to print up T - shirts that read **MY FRIEND DRIVES POLICE CAR 148,** the unit that patrols that area. On the reverse was printed **NO GUNS, NO DRUGS, NO GANGS.** These shirts were handed out by the officers to the children in the area as they patrolled. This face-to-face contact certainly proved positive. These shirts were also purchased with grant funds.

An important source of information to the assessment step was identified early in this initiative. The source was able to provide reliable feedback on how problem solving policing was impacting

the drug trafficking. It reported that the towing of the 21 cars from the area with the help of the Department of Transportation caused much teeth mashing, inasmuch as one of the cars towed contained eight pounds of marijuana and another contained fifteen pounds of marijuana. .With the added police attention, observation posts and officers searching for stashes, more stashes were being found. The source reported that drug dealers were in a tizzy, frantically searching for hidden cameras everywhere. The source said the drug dealers were in total shock and disarray and much of the costumer base was going elsewhere to purchase drugs.

Visual inspections of the area showed significant progress. The area was clean, and abandoned cars were absent. Traffic had declined. Most of the time the neighborhood was quiet and deserted of undesirables. Residents were now observed sitting on their porches and sweeping the public space in front of their homes.

Constant feedback was sought from the law abiding residents during this operation. Comments from the residents included:

"The police have made a big dent in things. I am proud, real proud of you."

"The shooting has declined. Things are better."

"We are pleased with what you are doing. We now have a place to park. The shooting has stopped. We can now sit on the porch and play cards. We are not afraid now."

"Things are beautiful now. You have made a big difference."

On July 2, 1997, and July 3, 1997, representatives of the United States Attorney's Office in Washington, D. C, conducted a 32 question random survey of 28 residents in the area. The

results of the survey were very positive. In summary:

20 out of 28 said the neighborhood is safer;

22 out of 28 said the neighborhood is a better place to live;

22 out of 28 said they were more satisfied with the police;

20 out of 28 said the police departments overall performance has improved;

21 out of 28 said the police are doing a better job in controlling street sales and the use of illegal drugs;

21 out of 28 said the police are doing a better job to prevent crime; and

20 out of 28 said the quality of life in the neighborhood is better.

Drug dealing was not eradicated in the neighborhood, and some physical and social disorder problems remain. However, the Problem Oriented Policing project in this neighborhood has significantly reduced the drug problem, improved the quality of life for the residents and raised the level of satisfaction the residents have with the police. Regular beat officers will maintain a constant vigil in the neighborhood to hold the ground.

End note

It was interesting to discover how interrelated and intertwined the problems were. Responses targeted at one problem, contributed to the solution to another. The towing of the abandoned cars, while aimed at the physical disorder problem, impacted the drug dealing, the dumping of stolen cars and the parking problems. The cleaning of the vacant lots addressed the physical disorder problem but also eliminated a hiding place for the drugs. The zero tolerance enforcement

impacted the public drinking, congregating of undesirables, the customer base for the drugs, the drug dealers, and the police presence in this tactic reduced fear in the community.