

**ABSTRACT: Formation of Homeless Outreach Team or the HOT Squad to combat crimes of opportunity committed by homeless persons**

**Scanning:** In the spring of 1996, crimes against property were high in the Second District of Washington, D.C., especially in areas frequented by the homeless. Public parks and alleyways were littered with trash. There was abundant evidence of homeless persons drinking, urinating and defecating in public, living in entrenched homeless encampments. Aggressive panhandling was on the rise and police were responding to an increasing number of assaults among homeless persons under the influence of alcohol, as well as one homicide of a homeless person near an encampment on the Whitehurst Freeway.

**Analysis:** Two-thirds of the crime in neighborhoods with homeless consisted of thefts and thefts from auto, both crimes of opportunity, with small items stolen that could be easily fenced on the street for cash. Examination of crime reports showed items stolen from cars were radios, cameras, cellular phones, money, and clothes through surreptitious smash-and-grab modus operandi. Crime analysis pin maps disclosed a nexus between theft-from-auto offenses and the growing street homeless population in both Foggy Bottom and Georgetown. Arrests confirmed that some homeless persons were committing repeated theft-from-auto offenses to support their dependence on alcohol or illicit drugs, such as "crack" cocaine.

**Response:** Formation of a specialized unit called the Homeless Outreach Team or HOT Squad on March 17, 1996 consisting of one sergeant and six officers that would utilize a "zero tolerance" approach for all "quality-of-life" offenses including aggressive panhandling, drinking and urinating in public, coupled with vigorous enforcement of public space violations and referral of homeless persons to appropriate support and shelter services.

**Assessment:** As "quality-of-life" arrests of homeless persons rose and homeless encampments were disbanded, property crimes declined dramatically and citizens responded positively to this visible police effort. Assessment is ongoing at this time.

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION: Formation of Homeless Outreach Team or HOT Squad to combat crimes of opportunity committed by homeless persons**

**Scanning:**

Shortly after assuming command of the Second District of the Metropolitan Police Department in the fall of 1995, Commander Jacqueline A. Barnes became aware of numerous concerns raised by citizens of her district about homeless persons living on the street in unsanitary conditions and the adverse impact of their presence on the Foggy Bottom neighborhood.

At monthly community meetings with police, residents repeatedly voiced their objections to the homeless taking over public parks and crowding out use of that space by other citizens through fear that intoxicated or mentally disturbed homeless persons might assault them. Daily telephone complaints were logged with police managers about homeless persons committing "quality-of-life" crimes, such as drinking, urinating, and defecating in public at varying locations. Calls for police service for fights among intoxicated homeless persons were increasing. Patrol observations confirmed that federal and city parks were fast becoming eyesores and that there were high concentrations of homeless persons in certain parks and entrenched encampments in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood, particularly under the Whitehurst Freeway.

Moreover, crimes against property, particularly thefts and thefts from auto, appeared high in the Second District, especially alongside areas frequented by the homeless. Complaints were pouring in about valuables stolen from the vehicles of tourists, residents, and businessmen and women. Just as cars in parking lots and on side streets were easy prey to theft-from-auto thieves, there were also increasing numbers of both shoplifting and petty thefts from small businesses. Crimes of violence among the homeless were also on the rise and culminated in one homicide of a

homeless person attributed to an argument with a drug dealer over money owed for "crack" cocaine.

The setting for the "homeless" problem was a quiet and prominent community. Foggy Bottom is the home of the State Department, George Washington University, foreign embassies and dignitaries, the Kennedy Center, the Watergate, the White House, the national mall, and all of our federal memorials. It includes some of the greatest and most prominent places in our nation's capital.

Analysis:

Crime analysis indicated that in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood overall, almost two-thirds of the crime consisted of two categories-thefts and thefts-from-auto. Both were considered crimes of opportunity with small items stolen that were left in plain view and that could easily be fenced on the street for cash. Examination of crime reports showed items most commonly stolen from cars were radios, cameras, cellular telephones, money, clothes, and even loose change through surreptitious smash-and-grab modus operandi. Tourists, commuters, and residents alike suffered great losses. Obviously, this hurt the economy and discouraged victims from coming back. The crime rate was also driving insurance rates sky-high due to the cost of replacing the smashed windows of victims' vehicles.

Pin maps disclosed a clear nexus between theft-from-auto offenses and the growing homeless population on the streets and in the parks of Foggy Bottom. Interviews of homeless persons arrested confirmed that some homeless persons were committing repeated theft-from-auto offenses to support their dependence on alcohol and **illicit** drugs, such as "crack" cocaine.

While police officers cannot control the behavior of victims (we may influence behavior),

such as leaving valuables in plain view in their vehicles, police managers thought they could decrease the opportunity for thefts from auto and thefts to occur by taking the perpetrators off of the streets by any legitimate means. Thus, vigorous enforcement of "quality-of-life" crimes would mean that homeless persons arrested for aggressively panhandling or drinking in public would not have a chance to commit other crimes for the duration of their confinement in jail.

Response:

On March 17, 1997, the Homeless Outreach Team was established by Commander Jacqueline A. Barnes of the Second District. This team, later commonly referred to as the HOT Squad, consisted of one sergeant and six officers. The team was comprised of select volunteers from the Second District proficient in job skills and expertise required for this line of work. All were motorcycle-trained because of the mobility and flexible deployment such training affords.

Enforcing "quality-of-life" crimes and dealing with the homeless population required a special breed of police officers. Compassion and sensitivity were equally as important as "zero tolerance" enforcement. Chris Whitley, a Washington Times reporter, later referred to this as "tough love."

From the outset, members of the HOT Squad received intensive in-service training on laws and regulations pertaining to "quality-of-life" crimes, such as aggressive panhandling, drinking in public, possession of open containers of alcohol and urinating in public. Occupying public space and temporary abode regulations were also studied with legal advice from attorneys from both the D.C. Corporation Counsel and General Counsel's Office of the Metropolitan Police Department. The D.C. Corporation Counsel's Office, which prosecutes many arrests for minor crimes in the District of Columbia, agreed to paper or accept as many "quality-of-life" arrests

coming into their office as they could handle because the "homeless" problem was perceived as an area where that office could serve the community at large.

Mental health agents and doctors from the D.C. Department of Human Resources provided additional training to HOT Squad members on hypothermia treatment, first aid, and grounds for emergency hospitalization of the mentally ill. They offered advice and ways that they can assist, especially with mentally ill persons who became combative or violent in public.

HOT Squad members also received in-depth training on blood pathogens, safe methods of searching for and disposing of needles or sharps, and communicable diseases, such as AIDS, Hepatitis B, and tuberculosis. These diseases are especially high among homeless populations and among drug abusers. Information pamphlets came courtesy of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and members were instructed to receive shots for Hepatitis B at the Police Clinic and to use extreme caution when dealing with sharps and blood pathogens. Surgical gloves were required when conducting arrests, searches and seizures.

A unique image for the HOT Squad was created in order to attract attention, provide high visibility, for practical reasons, and to build esprit de corps. Members were equipped with battle dress uniforms (BDUs) and distinctive blue, HondaMghthawk motorcycles. These 250 CC motorcycles, already issued to the district, were in need of parts and repairs. These repairs were undertaken by the individual officers. The BDUs were initially bought by the respective members, who were later reimbursed by the department after a special request from the Commanding Officer of the Second District and approval of the Chief of Police.

Sergeant Michael Vincent, as the team leader, was primarily responsible for the organization and deployment of the HOT Squad to combat the homeless problem. In order

to accomplish their mission, Sergeant Vincent maintained a HOT Squad file and created special assignments and titles for each member.

Officer Joseph Gilson became the intelligence officer and monitored all homeless activities and campsites within the Second District. He provided his own personal computer and printer for this vital task. Soon he developed a list of "hot" spots and campsites with intelligence data on each person with whom the team came into contact. This information was then provided to all team members during daily roll calls. An arrest information file, referrals, emergency commitments and tracking system was also maintained and extremely useful for the entire force.

Officer Charles Baumgart was the warrant officer and was responsible for monitoring persons arrested on a daily basis for warrant status. He too provided his own personal computer and printer. Wanted persons in target areas were identified and printouts were provided to each team member to aid in locating and arresting wanted persons with "no fixed address."

Officer Michael Barron was the administrative officer responsible for compiling homeless information and related matters. Private First Class David Moseley was the supply officer who provided members with all needed parts for motorcycle repairs, through scavenging and working with the Second District's vehicle maintenance officer and the department's Fleet Maintenance Division. Additionally, Officer Moseley supplied and maintained all of the equipment needed to accomplish the HOT Squad's mission. Some of this equipment was provided by individual members and the D.C. Fire Department.

Officer Daniella Jenkins, followed by Officer Andrew Struhar, was the photographic information officer, who maintained a photo file of each person arrested, warned, referred to shelters or committed for emergency treatment. The film and camera were supplied by the Second

District's Crime Scene Search Office. The homeless photographic file later proved to be an invaluable tool in identifying suspects in criminal investigations and in locating homeless persons who has been reported missing.

Officer Mark Wright, followed by Officer David Santiago, was the liaison officer, who was responsible for maintaining close contact with other government agencies, other local police, community members, and homeless advocates. They also attended meetings with civic groups and representatives of organizations running homeless shelters and soup kitchens.

All of these assignments were in addition to patrol duties the HOT Squad performed as a unit on a daily basis. Members vigorously patrolled and monitored all of the identifiable "hot" spots in the Second District. Violators caught drinking in public, in possession of open containers of alcohol, aggressively panhandling, or stealing property from cars were arrested, the mentally ill were cared for, and all who needed help were referred to the closest homeless advocacy group, such as the Georgetown Ministry, Friendship Place, and appropriate health care. This included professional assistance from the Emergency Psychiatric Response Division (EPRD) who are on call in the District of Columbia twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Additionally, all arrests were appropriately tracked through the court system, by working with prosecutors with both the Office of the Corporation Counsel and the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Assessment:

The press soon heard of the HOT Squad and showed an interest. One representative piece was prepared by Hugh Thomas, a reporter for Channel 8 CNN Television News, whose news story on the HOT Squad was called "The HOT Squad's in town." ( See video, Attachment #1)

On April 23, 1996, the George Washington University Grounds, assisted the HOT Squad

in cleaning trash and debris underneath the Whitehurst Freeway located at 27th and Pennsylvania Avenue, Northwest. This task, performed by sixteen volunteers, lasted three days and required three truck skid loads. The area cleaned up was the team's biggest challenge and removed a significant eyesore for the community. Over the years, this area attracted many homeless persons. They set up campsites and accumulated a large amount of trash, squalor, and human waste that posed a serious health risk and danger to the community. Moreover, clean-up of the Whitehurst Freeway encampment confirmed that homeless persons were responsible for repeated theft-from-auto offenses, as numerous car parts and tools were among the debris loaded onto the trash trucks.

This cleanup was photographed and reported by The Washington Times. See "Shantytown Shake-Down," which appeared on April 25, 1996. (Attachment #2)

On May 10, 1996, the HOT Squad with help from Robert Brewer of Friendship Place and Dr. Robert Keisling, Director of the Emergency Psychiatric Response Division (EPRD), committed Charles Cavanaugh, a male approximately 60 years of age, from a tent on private premises alongside River Road and Brandywine Street, Northwest. The property owner originally allowed Mr. Cavanaugh to set up his make-shift home there but later wished him removed because he was depositing trash all over her property and she needed to sell it. Mr. Cavanaugh was being monitored by Robert Brewer of Friendship Place but on one occasion threatened him with a hammer. Mr. Cavanaugh refused help from Hechinger's Store who offered to place him in a hotel. Mr. Cavanaugh thought he was God and owned the world. He did not wish to leave. He was ultimately committed to St. Elizabeth's Hospital by a judge. Dr. Keisling testified during the hearing that Mr. Cavanaugh's blood sugar was three times higher than normal



and had he not been forcibly removed, he would have died. Mr. Cavanaugh is on a waiting list for a nursing home and is doing very well, physically and emotionally. See The Washington Times article, "Homeless Man Arrested in N.W, Tent Hauled Off," that appeared May 10, 1996. (Attachment #3).

On the negative side, on August 28, 1996, a Washington Times article appeared, "Police Should Fight Crime, Not Vagrants. (Attachment #4) On September 6, 1996, a Washington Times article rebutted the above article. See "Fighting Vagrancy is Proactive Policing," authored by Officer Michael Barron, a member of the HOT Squad. (Attachment #5)

Other positive news stories included an August 30, 1996 story by Washington Times reporter Chris Whitley called "D.C.'s HOT Squad," written after a ride-along with the team (Attachment #6), an article in Street Smart, a local neighborhood paper, called "HOT Squad Success Story," (Attachment #7) and an October 16, 1996 story in The Northwest Current by James L. Nash called "Police Cite Squad for Crime Drop." (Attachment #8)

As of March 1, 1997, the HOT Squad remained a success story. The Second District no longer had a rampant homeless problem. Hot spots were cleaned up and were no longer a safe haven for "quality-of-life" offenders, some of whom were not homeless. Residents now frequent federal and city parks, as well as Dupont Circle, which had previously been taken over by the homeless. The Whitehurst Freeway remains a model example and is still clean.

Members of the HOT Squad shared their training with regular patrol officers so that each member of the Second District is familiar with "quality-of-life" crimes. Handouts were issued to all officers and a homeless handbook was made up by the HOT Squad as a resource available to all members of the Second District. This book contains addresses and phone numbers of

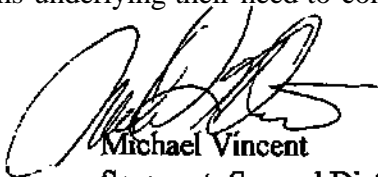
government and private agencies who can assist with homeless problems. Other Metropolitan Police Department patrol districts and university campus police departments have requested this handbook and are now addressing quality-of-life issues vigorously.

The HOT Squad experience showed that visible enforcement of small crimes produced significant results. A month after the HOT Squad started, crime dropped for the first time since the same time the year before. Thefts from auto dropped significantly. On average HOT Squad members were making five arrests daily. Most arrests were for possession of open containers of alcohol (POCA), aggressive panhandling, and drinking in public. (Attachments #9 and #10.)

As part of the assessment process, monthly meetings were held with homeless advocates, EPRD, and members of the Advisory Neighborhood Councils. In general, most if not all, were pleased with the end results.

Although the assessment of the HOT Squad's efforts is still ongoing, their methods have been extended throughout the Second District as all members are now aggressively enforcing "quality-of-life" crimes as a means of removing persons who are also committing more serious crimes of opportunity to support their dependencies on alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs.

Teamwork with the community, advocacy groups, the courts, and prosecutors led to resolution of a difficult problem through vigorous enforcement of all city ordinances, organized clean-up efforts, as well as appropriate referral of homeless persons to services to assist them with the problems underlying their-need to commit crimes.



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Attachments

1. Video (stops at 111) of Channel 8 CCN Television story entitled, "The HOT Squad's in Town"
2. Washington Times story printed April 25, 1996 called "Shantytown Shake-down"
3. Washington Times article printed May 10, 1996 called "Homeless Man Arrested in D.C , Tent Hauled Off"
4. Washington Times article printed August 28,1996 called "Police Should Fight Crime, Not Vagrants"
5. Washington Times letter to the editor printed September 6, 1996 called "Fighting Vagrancy Is Proactive Policing"
6. Washington Times article printed August 30, 1996 called "D.C.'s HOT Squad"
7. Street Smart story called "HOT Squad Success Story"
8. Northwest Current story printed October 16, 1996 called "Police Cite Squad for Crime Drop"
9. HOT Squad's Statistics for CY 1996
10. HOT Squad's Statistics for CY 1997