

Youth Initiative Program

Abstract
El Paso Police Department
Herman Goldstein Award Submission
May 1999

In the early 1990s, crime in El Paso, Texas seemed to be increasing in record proportions, especially crime involving young people such as gang violence. El Paso has a median income of only \$32,000 and 26% of the population live at or below the poverty line. Chronic high unemployment and a low level of educational attainment have hindered efforts to upgrade the workforce. Only 20% of El Pasoans over the age of 25 have a college degree. In addition, 37% of the population is under twenty years of age. These conditions, combined with our location on the U.S./Mexico border, provided a fertile environment for gang membership and drug trafficking.

The Youth Initiative Program was created by the El Paso Police Department as an umbrella organization to foster communication and partnership between various agencies which pool their resources to offer the greatest amount of help to at-risk juveniles before they become involved in illegal activities. It gives youth an alternative to gang involvement and has provided an avenue for police officers to reach out to our teens in a positive and constructive manner. YIP utilizes a three-step process:

- A task force of agencies selects a neighborhood where at-risk youth are targeted.
- Quality of life issues in the area are then addressed, such as the installation of lights, clean-up of neighborhood parks, and the organization of Neighborhood and Business Watches. Graffiti sites are painted over or sandblasted and volunteers are recruited from area residents.
- In the third stage of the process, YIP agencies begin identifying and providing services to at-risk youth and their families in the area.

The Youth Initiative Program has brought law enforcement, community agencies, schools, churches, and businesses together in a collaborative effort to reduce youth problems by early intervention and prevention. The program membership has grown from twenty agencies in 1995 to more than one hundred in 1998, and the number of at-risk referrals to YIP has increased from eight in 1995 to 245 in 1998. "YIP on the Road", an outreach program implemented in 1998, has brought the services of the member agencies to additional neighborhoods and over 5,000 residents in just one year.

Youth Initiative Program

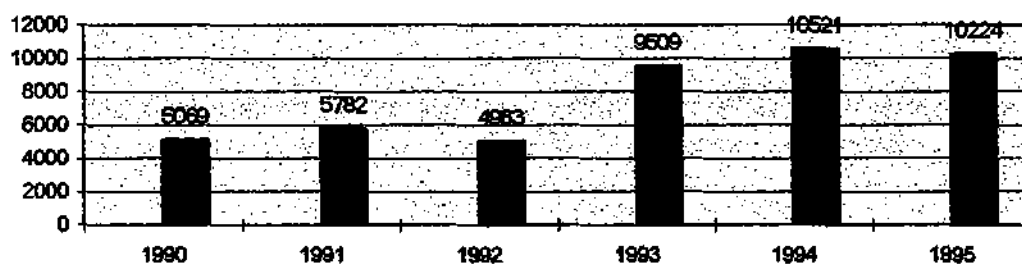
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A. Scanning

In the early 1990s, crime in El Paso, Texas seemed to be increasing in record proportions, especially crime involving young people such as gang violence. In 1992, drive-by shootings had increased 135% over the previous year. Gang-related murders were up 156%. El Paso has a median income of only \$32,000 and 26% of the population live at or below the poverty line. Chronic high unemployment and a low level of educational attainment have hindered efforts to upgrade the workforce. Only 20% of El Pasoans over the age of 25 have a college degree. In addition, 37% of the population is under twenty years of age.

These conditions, combined with our location on the U.S./Mexico border, provided a fertile environment for gang membership and drug trafficking. By the 1990s, the El Paso/Chidada Juarez (Mexico) corridor had become a major entrance and staging point for distribution of narcotics throughout the United States, as drug cartels in Mexico became more powerful and organized.

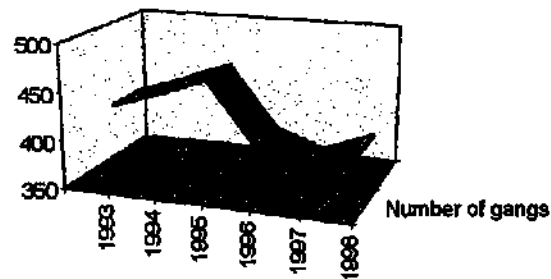
Number of Juvenile Arrests in El Paso, Texas



In 1993, there were 438 identified gangs in the City and County of El Paso. That number had grown to 471 by 1995. The gang count consists of street gangs, car clubs (that meet the definition of a gang), tagging crews/party crews and prison gangs. The majority of gang violence in the El Paso area is attributed to local Hispanic street gangs, which are involved in all aspects of criminal activity. They lack a sophisticated, hierarchical, organizational structure. However, the majority of violence is not drug driven. Most of El Paso's gang violence occurs for "respect" issues such as graffiti challenges, retaliation, throwing gang hand signs and mad-dogging.

Reasons for joining gangs include a need for recognition, status, safety or security, power, excitement, and new experience. Youth raised under conditions of social deprivation are particularly drawn to gangs.

Number of Gangs In El Paso, Texas from 1993-1998



There were many resources in the El Paso area, including law enforcement agencies, government agencies, schools, civic groups, community and religious organizations, which were providing services which could help to combat juvenile crime, but they were not operating in any cohesive or cooperative system. A method was needed to bring these resources together.

B. Analysis

Criminal behavior, values, and belief systems have to be redirected by providing educational programs, identifying underlying issues, fostering a concern for youth and community welfare, building character, responsibility and respect for the lives of others. Six basic strategies have been used in dealing effectively with youth gangs and criminal behavior:

- *Neighborhood mobilization*
- *Social intervention*
- *Provision for social and economic opportunities*
- *Gang suppression and incarceration*
- *Organizational development*
- *Religious training*

In February 1995, a local school district convened a summit at which representatives from interested organizations had the chance to meet and share information for the first time. The discussion also identified out some of the barriers that had prevented these groups from accomplishing their goals.

- *Lack of information for youth and their families about available resources.*
- *Lack of accessibility to services and money for services.*
- *Lack of a county-wide coordinated effort.*
- *Tendency of the community to solve problems vertically instead of horizontally.*
- *Lack of commitment to the longevity of successful programs.*
- *Tendency to be reactive instead of proactive.*
- *Lack of communication among divisions of the criminal justice system.*

The El Paso Police Department took the lead in June 1995, and spearheaded the formation of the Youth Initiative Program (YIP) to overcome some of these barriers. YIP started with twenty agencies in the El Paso area including the Child Crisis Center, the Shelter for Battered Women, the Juvenile Probation Department, the U.S. Border Patrol, and Child Protective Services. An Assistant Chief of the Police Department co-chaired YIP along with the head of the Juvenile Probation Department.

These agencies committed to meeting monthly to share information about resources and referrals. The El Paso Police Department assigned Officer David Cuevas, Jr. to be the Department's full-time liaison to YIP. The EPPD also pledged to:

- *Review and analyze crime reports to identify trends in the frequency, location and type of crime.*
- *Play a key role informing and maintaining Neighborhood and Business Watch Programs in targeted areas.*
- *Train residents in crime reporting procedures, including use of 9-1-1.*
- *Provide home security surveys.*
- *Create and distribute a monthly newsletter to keep members updated on the activities of YIP.*
- *Conduct community presentations, including parental responsibility training, and assist with community projects.*
- *Coordinate with other specialty units within the department which could provide information and/or services to the YIP.*

The Police Department had already established several programs as part of their move into community policing. These included the Police Area Representative (PAR) Program, the Gang Unit, the Serious Habitual Offender Comprehensive Action Program (SHOCAP), the School Resource Officer (SRO) Program, the Crimes Against Children Unit and the Crime Prevention Unit.

YIP would bring together law enforcement, community agencies, schools, churches, and businesses who commit to a collaborative and cooperative effort focused on pooling their resources to offer the greatest amount of help to at-risk juveniles before they got into serious trouble with gangs and/or drugs. YEP targeted youth aged 12 through 16 who were beginning to exhibit problem behavior such as cutting class or being habitually absent from school. By not responding to truancy, the community was sending a message that the youth could get away with worse behavior later.

YIP represented a new direction for the Police Department as it went beyond law enforcement and into methods of prevention and intervention. It also required communication and sharing of information with other community agencies. The Youth Initiative Program promoted the ideals of community policing. Early and positive interaction with police officers was necessary to encourage young people to identify the police as role models and to resist the temptation to become involved in gangs or to sample drugs.

Officer Cuevas, a 20 year veteran of the department, was uniquely qualified to work with youth. He had been an instructor in School Resource Officer program and was certified in both Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) and Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT). He had also served as a presenter for the Juvenile Probation Department's First Offender Program.

After meeting several times with the organizations interested in providing services a Community Task Force of six agencies was formed (Child Protective Services, the Juvenile Probation Department, the school district, the Jobs Corps Center, Texans' War on Drugs, and the EPPD), and the following strategies were agreed upon:

- *To provide seamless access to timely, accurate, and relevant services information*
- *To improve communication between YIP members*
- *To reduce duplication of data, referrals, and services*
- *To coordinate information sharing*

C. Response

The primary mission of the group was to promote individual responsibility and community commitment. The goal was to reduce crime and fear by carefully examining the characteristics of problems in targeted neighborhoods and then applying problem solving remedies with available resources. To accomplish this, YIP developed a three step process.

The first step was to identify, organize and empower specific neighborhood areas (3 to 8 blocks) that were experiencing high rates of youth crime. Existing Neighborhood and Business Watches, community service agencies and religious groups in this area are contacted. These groups receive training on "neighborhood target hardening", identification of neighborhood problems and accessing community resources.

The Task Force picked an area near the Marty Robbins Park in East El Paso because it was representative of citywide problems with graffiti and truancy. It was decided to use this neighborhood as a pilot project, and to develop processes that could then be applied to other troubled neighborhoods.

In the second step, YIP tries to improve the quality of life in the target area. It assists the neighborhood residents in cleaning the area and teaches them how to access resources to maintain it. YIP also helps to identify needed community improvements (lights, signs, traffic flow, fencing), and provides guidance on how to cultivate business, religious, and neighborhood groups to address future problems.

The first YIP "Clean-Up Day" was scheduled in February 1996, at Marty Robbins Park. YIP mobilized over 20 agencies and 400 volunteers who picked up more than 250 trash bags, cleaned 25 graffiti sites and signed up 15 area residents for the Neighborhood Watch Program. YIP followed up on the success of this day by organizing the community in obtaining 21 lights for the park, which previously had none.

The third step is the identification of problem youth in the target area. Through shared information from schools and other juvenile agencies, the police aggressively enforce curfew violations, truancy, graffiti, drugs, in the target area. The delinquent juvenile's associates and family members are also identified.

Police officers patrolled the area aggressively in February and March. They stopped juveniles who were truant or out late at night and their names were cross-referenced with the school district. This process identified eight chronic truants, six girls and two boys, ages 12 through 14. These eight were referred to the task force agencies for provision of services such as counseling, tutoring, and parenting classes.

At YIP meetings, the juvenile's situation is discussed and each YIP agency identifies the resources they have available to address the problems of the youth and his family. Usually, a lead agency and contact person is selected, who will meet with the family. The student and parents then enter into a contract with YIP. The contract stipulates that the youth must adhere to

guidelines, such as having a curfew or performing community service, to make up for their bad behavior. The agencies will continue to work with the juveniles and their families as long as necessary, charging no or very low fees.

By targeting a specific area, YEP tries to create "neighborhood empowerment" within the residents. By identifying problem juveniles, information can be shared between agencies to pinpoint the type of intervention that is needed. By trying to improve the overall quality of life, a holistic problem-solving approach is used to combat and redirect the negative factors in the juvenile's life style.

In 1996, the full year of operation, YIP agencies established a process to use for referring juveniles in need of services. The referral was initiated by members of the community, received by the YIP intake committee, and forwarded to one of four newly formed Group Resource Staffing Committees for coordination of services. Committees included representatives from criminal justice, public, private and social agencies, churches and school districts. The focus of the group was to facilitate access to prevention, early identification, and referral services for at-risk youth in the area

Group Resource Staffing Committees

The Group Resource Staffing Committees became the heart of the Youth Initiative Program. In each targeted neighborhood there was a group of agencies, already in place and already providing services to the community. YEP brings together five or six of those agencies, which are called the Core Group. These agencies establish a close relationship with the counselors and administration at the area schools. When a problem occurs at the school, a referral is generated and forwarded to the Core Group. The Core Group will review the referral and assign the youth to an agency for services. The Core Group has access to all of the YIP

membership for assistance and expertise. The school counselor is notified of which agency is handling the referral, and receives up-dates from the agency.

The Group Resource Staffing Committees began working in the high schools, but soon discovered that interaction with middle and elementary schools was necessary to provide prevention and early intervention in family problems. Frequently the parents and younger siblings of a juvenile delinquent were also in need of services.

In addition to establishing the Group Resource Staffing Committees, other major accomplishments were achieved by the YIP in 1996.

- *An additional 40 agencies became YIP members*
- *The group developed a Memorandum of Understanding to be used by and between all members. The MOU recognizes the benefit of cooperating to develop a strategy to effectively address the problems of youth. The members commit to improving existing responses and initiating new methods to reach children through a collaborative approach.*
- *Formal and informal communication links were established. Monthly meetings were held in the Police Department Headquarters, with the purpose of sharing information, developing goals, visions, increasing knowledge, raising awareness, building skills, finding alternatives, and targeting communities, families, and individuals.*
- *Officer Cuevas served as a resource for the community by teaching courses in Parental Responsibility, sharing police information, attending committee meetings, preparing newsletters, doing community presentations and staff training. This was especially important because other police officers in the field needed to be aware of the program to generate referrals of problem youth.*

- *The referral form was developed, and YIP received 14 referrals in 1996*

The next targeted neighborhood to be selected was an older area in central El Paso near Memorial Park. Five townhall community meetings were conducted at Crockett Middle School to assess the needs, to discuss problem-solving techniques, and develop long term strategies and solutions.

In March 1997, YIP organized a second Clean-Up day at Memorial Park, mobilizing over 15 agencies and 300 volunteers who picked up 500 bags of trash and cleaned 15 graffiti sites.

In 1997, YIP increased the referral pool by making contact with all three local school districts, SRO officers, PAR officers, and families in need. It became necessary to hire a YIP secretary and to purchase a computer to relieve Officer Cuevas of some of the administrative duties. A detailed record-keeping process was developed to store and maintain information and to track the progress of the program.

Other accomplishments of the YEP in 1997 included:

- *The membership grew to 92 agencies.*
- *A hotline directory was developed for the YIP agencies. This directory was distributed to all members to facilitate access to prevention and intervention services.*
- *YIP continued to develop an organizational structure for members that clearly defined interrelated roles of agencies.*
- *The YIP officer provided training to the patrol officers at all the Regional Command Centers, Police Area Representatives (PAR), School Resource Officers (SRO), shift officers, Citizen's Advisory Board members, and civic and community groups about the YIP referral process.*

- *19 classes in Parental Responsibility were held, with 421 parents attending,*
- *Other YIP community training reached over 380 adults and 1896 students.*
- *The number of YIP referrals increased to 125 persons, and after action reports were initiated to follow-up on these referrals.*

In July 1998, a civilian Program Coordinator was hired to assist Officer Cuevas. Ms. Nell Tovar had previously served on the Police Department Citizen's Advisory Board and several other city-sponsored committees. Her background in business and marketing brought improved organization, networking and mobilization of the community to YIP. She helped to standardize training among the agencies and initiated a monitoring system to follow-up on referrals.

The Police Department had recently implemented a new grant program called Community Action Teams (CAT) in which a team of six officers worked in targeted distressed neighborhoods for a specified period of time, educating and empowering the residents to make positive improvements. Interaction between YIP and the CAT officers was encouraged, and several joint projects and events took place.

The creation of "YIP on the Road" in 1998 brought YIP agencies into more neighborhoods in need of services. Four target areas were selected for "Yip on the Road". This combined series of community events mobilized over 125 agencies and 350 volunteers, reaching 5,250 residents.

A "Train the Trainers" workshop for YIP members was held in August 1998. Those members then conducted a series of six "How to Relate to Youth" workshops which were attended by 229 educators, prevention and intervention counselors, and law enforcement personnel.

Other YIP accomplishments in 1998:

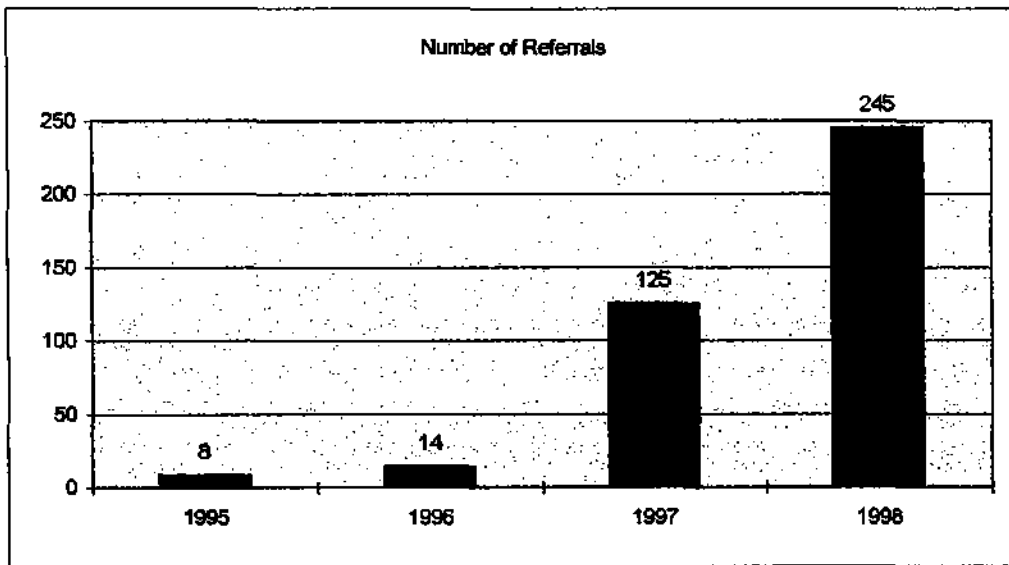
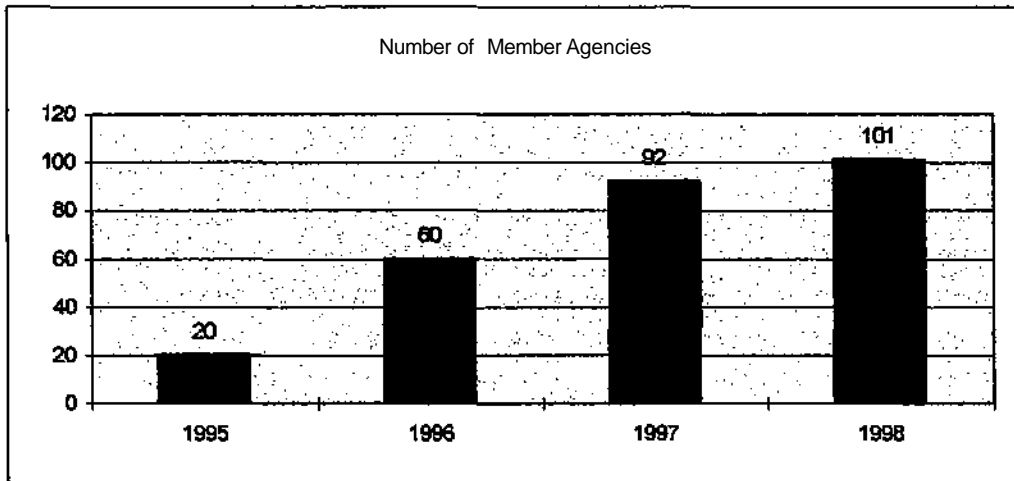
- *Membership grew to 101.*
- *The YIP Officer and Civilian Coordinator conducted a total of 75 presentations on various subjects.*
- *The YIP mailing list increased to over 350 community organizations and agencies.*
- *YIP collaborated with two local school districts in the annual Anti-Drug Red Ribbon campaign and reached more than 1,000 children.*
- *YIP received 245 referrals.*

D. Assessment

YIP was developed as an umbrella organization to foster communication and partnership between various agencies which pool their resources to offer the greatest amount of help to at-risk juveniles before they become involved in illegal activities. It gives youth an alternative to gang involvement and has provided an avenue for police officers to reach out to our teens in a positive and constructive manner. YIP utilizes a three-step process:

- A task force of agencies is created to select a neighborhood where at-risk youth are targeted.
- Quality of life issues in the area are then addressed: such as the installation of Hghts, clean-up of neighborhood parks, and the organization of Neighborhood and Business Watches. Graffiti sites are painted over or sandblasted and volunteers are recruited from area residents.
- In the third stage of the process, YIP agencies begin identifying and focusing on at-risk youth in the area.

GROWTH OF THE YOUTH INITIATIVE PROGRAM



The Youth Initiative Program brought law enforcement, community agencies, schools, churches, and businesses together in a collaborative effort to reduce youth problems by early intervention and prevention. The program membership has grown from twenty agencies in 1995 to over a hundred in 1998, and the number of referrals has increased from eight in 1995 to 245 in 1998. Nineteen local schools now have Group Resource Staffing Committees working in partnership with the counselors, and two more are in progress.

YIP continues to conduct monthly forums to network, identify neighborhood problems and develop solutions. The agencies bring information about their services and programs to the meetings. Non-profit agencies and hundreds of volunteers have been mobilized to clean up graffiti and trash in their neighborhoods. The public/private partnerships that have developed as a result of this comprehensive program have built trust and improved communication between the citizens, the schools, non-profit agencies and the various law enforcement agencies.

E. Agency and Officer Information

1. The Youth Initiative Program was created by the El Paso Police Department in response to rising juvenile crime in 1995. It was a program that meshed with the Department's implementation of community policing. Officer David Cuevas, Jr. was selected to develop the actual mechanics of the program. Officer Cuevas, a 20 year veteran of the department, was uniquely qualified to work with youth. YIP is under the direction of the Crimes Against Children commander, but Officer Cuevas has direct access to executive management on YIP matters. A Deputy Chief currently serves as co-chairperson of the YIP board. The YIP staff has grown to include a secretary and a Civilian Program Coordinator.

2. The Department implemented YIP as a part of its overall community policing program and several Police Area Representatives and Community Service Officers, as well as management, have attended training in this area. Officer Cuevas has been sent by YIP to training in Washington, DC, and conducts training at the Police Academy to inform new recruits about the Youth Initiative Program.
3. Incentives were the freedom to make decisions within the defined scope of the program, to interact with the community and serve as the Department's spokesperson, and the ability when necessary to bypass the chain of command,
4. The primary resources came from the numerous agencies who joined YIP. The sharing of ideas and the referral of low and no-cost services were essential in achieving the program goals. No single agency could have such an effective impact on the targeted youth and their families.
5. Officer Cuevas encountered initial resistance from fellow police officers to utilize YIP until they realized that it was a handy referral tool for juvenile offenders. The Regional Commanders were somewhat defensive about Officer Cuevas intruding on their "turf" but support from senior management and the staff training provided an understanding of the program goals. Bringing the agencies together, overcoming territorialism and developing a process that would reduced overlap of services and ensure that no one slipped through the cracks were some of the other initial problems.
6. In addition to the full time officer position, a portion of the department's Local Law Enforcement Block Grant was allotted to the YIP program, providing funds for training and for a computer (\$4,710). As the program grew, it became necessary to add a secretary as well as a civilian coordinator to the staff. Funding for these

positions and for related office equipment and supplies (\$71,655) also came from the IXEBG.

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