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Crime and Blight In Ward One

Fort Myers, Florida



Herman Goldstein Award

**Submitted by:
Police Chief Larry D. Hart
Fort Myers Police Department**



FORT MYERS POLICE DEPARTMENT

UNITY • PRIDE • COMMITMENT

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CHIEF LARRY D. HART

April 23, 2001

Herman Goldstein Award Selection Committee
PERF
1120 Connecticut Avenue, NW
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Dear Committee Members:

On behalf of the Fort Myers Police Department, I am proud to nominate our agency for the prestigious Herman Goldstein Award.

I nominate for your consideration our "Crime and Blight in Ward One" project. As you will see from our award submission, crime in this particular area of our city was skyrocketing. It's not surprising that at the same time crime was rising, the appearance of the neighborhood was deteriorating. Vacant lots were overgrown; homes were in disrepair - or worse; and residents didn't take pride in their neighborhood.

It became clear to our agency that we couldn't fight crime without also fighting blight. Therefore traditional law enforcement techniques wouldn't work. We developed a multi-faceted approach to both reduce crime and improve the quality of life for the Ward One residents.

Although the project is ongoing, already we are seeing results. Crime is decreasing; residents are more involved than ever before; and the neighborhood certainly looks better.

I am proud to share with you our "Crime and Blight in Ward One" project, and I appreciate your consideration. It is an honor to submit a nomination to you and we thank you for the opportunity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Larry D. Hart". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Larry D. Hart
Chief of Police

LDHIkw

"Crime and Blight In Ward One"

Fort Myers, Florida

Nestled along the Southwest Florida Gulf Coast, the City of Fort Myers serves a population of 50,000 residents. The city is the hub of business and government activity. The weekday population typically doubles. The city is divided into five wards. Ward One is the focus of our project. It is located on the northeast side of the city, and is bordered by the Caloosahatchee River to the north and residential neighborhoods to the south, east and west. An active business corridor bisects Ward One. The residents are culturally diverse and typically renters.

Scanning:

Crime in Ward One was increasing, while crime elsewhere in the city was decreasing. Juvenile crime and truancy were problems. Equally important to police, business leaders and residents was the neighborhood's poor appearance. Vacant lots were overgrown, and abandoned vehicles littered the community. Homes were dilapidated to the point of being unsightly and unsafe. Police knew the problems of crime and blight were interwoven. Tackling them jointly would have dual impact by decreasing crime and improving the quality of life.

Analysis:

Police used crime statistics and discussions with business leaders, Neighborhood Watch coordinators and residents to assess the problem. Burglaries,

robberies and auto thefts were the target crime problems. Abandoned vehicles, run-down homes and overgrown lots were the prime concern with blight. The majority of residents not only weren't involved, they didn't care. No community partnerships existed.

Response:

Traditional law enforcement wasn't working. The run-down appearance of the neighborhood bred criminal activity. Police launched a comprehensive plan to decrease crime by "cleaning up" Ward One, getting residents involved and fostering partnerships with other agencies. Successful "code sweeps" tackled blight. Police and residents increased the number of Neighborhood Watches from six to 14. The business community formed its first alliance. Specialists hosted crime prevention seminars and produced bilingual fliers. A curfew was enacted for juveniles at night and during school hours. Community policing officers attacked "hot zones" of criminal activity.

Assessment:

Crime is decreasing in Ward One. Burglaries are down. Auto thefts are down. Robberies are down. The number of calls for service for crime is down. Residents are more active. Business leaders are united. A new park and community center have been built. And the neighborhoods "look" better: 233 abandoned cars have been removed; 39 vacant lots have been cleared; 11 condemned homes have been demolished.

DESCRIPTION

"Crime and Blight In Ward One"

Fort Myers, Florida

Crime in the City of Fort Myers has been gradually decreasing, since reaching an unacceptable peak in 1993. The Fort Myers Police Department attributes the decrease to aggressive patrols, the expansion of our community policing initiative and the active participation of residents and business owners. The crime rate has plummeted to the same level it was in 1988, even though more and more people have moved into the city. Property crimes outnumber violent crimes in the City of Fort Myers by more than 4 to 1.

As the county seat in Lee County, the City of Fort Myers is the center of government services and business activity. In addition, the 38-square mile city is largely residential and more urban compared to the rest of the county. Wide, open areas are few and far between. The "City of Fort Myers" also is home to the winter estates of Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, therefore making the city an attractive tourist destination.

Scanning:

The decrease in crime in the City of Fort Myers has not made the Fort Myers Police Department complacent. The agency constantly analyzes crime statistics and adjusts resources accordingly, in hopes of continuing to push crime downward. Problem-oriented policing is key to accomplishing this.

In this light, the Fort Myers Police Department became concerned when officers noticed crime in the Ward One area of the city was increasing, despite the downward trend citywide. Ward One is one of five geographic wards in the city. Each ward is represented by

its own City Council Member. A community policing officers similarly is assigned to each ward.

Ward One is located in the northeast section of the city and encompasses nearly 7 square miles. The community is bordered by a riverfront residential neighborhood to the north; and residential neighborhoods to the south, east and west. A business corridor bisects the ward along Palm Beach Boulevard, a four-lane state roadway. The population of Ward One totals more than 12,000 residents. United States Census figures for 2000 have not yet been released for specific neighborhoods, however, we know from experience the community is culturally diverse. Ward One boasts a large Hispanic and African-American population. The Hispanic population is growing the fastest. In addition, we know a greater percentage of residents are renters, rather than property owners, compared to other areas of the city.

Officer Michael Titmuss, a veteran Community Policing specialist, was assigned to Ward One in early 2000. He immediately began watching crime trends and getting to know the Ward One citizens and their concerns. He met directly with homeowners, renters, transients, business leaders, Neighborhood Watch coordinators, apartment managers, church groups, civic associations and the Ward One City Council Member. The problems consistently raised were threefold:

- **Crime**
 - / Part I crimes, particularly burglary, robbery and auto theft
 - / Juvenile delinquency and truancy
 - / Prostitution
 - / Robberies of largely Hispanic victims
- **Blight**

- / Run-down homes, buildings, cars
- / Absentee landlords with no accountability
- / Lack of landscaping and lighting along business corridor

- **Lack of communication and partnerships**

- / Lack of information sharing among various city departments
- / No professional business alliances
- / No organized residential groups
- / No community partnerships

From the standpoint of crime, police were most concerned about burglaries, robberies and auto thefts, which were on the rise. In addition, officers noticed a disproportionate number of juvenile-related crimes. An increasing number of juveniles were skipping school, being expelled from school and dropping out of school. Naturally that tends to breed crime problems. Officers noticed these same juveniles were habitually on the streets and initiating calls for service. Juveniles also were causing problems in the nighttime hours, when it was not uncommon for large groups to cruising on bikes.

As we've mentioned, the Hispanic community is quite large in Ward One, and cultural differences were causing crime problems. Hispanic residents tended to distrust banks and opted not to open accounts. On paydays, it was not uncommon for residents to cash their checks and carry all the cash in their pockets or in their boots. When criminals realized this, Hispanics quickly became easy targets for robberies. Likewise, Hispanic residents recognized that fact and lived in fear. Police found themselves responding time and again to robberies, particularly between convenient stores and their homes. These robberies became so prevalent that people on the street gave them a nickname: "HTM," or Hispanic Teller Machines.

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Residents, business owners and police alike all noticed prostitution was a problem in Ward One. Namely, prostitutes would use the main business corridor - Palm Beach Boulevard - to flag down "johns." Naturally, businesses don't appreciate prostitutes loitering around their stores and residents certainly did not like encountering the prostitutes while driving through their neighborhood.

From the standpoint of blight in Ward One, the community was not visually appealing. In fact it had been so neglected that it was a haven for criminals. Based on the "Broken Window" theory, we know a run-down neighborhood breeds criminal activity and welcomes criminals to live there. The problem was complicated by the fact that a high percentage of homes were rented. Absentee landlords didn't take a vested interest in keeping up their properties since they didn't live there. And renters don't tend to maintain properties as fastidiously as homeowners. Many were unsightly and unsafe. Yards and vacant lots were overrun, and hundreds of abandoned cars were left to litter in yards, lots and roadways.

The appearance of Palm Beach Boulevard was a major concern to business owners, residents and city officials alike. In addition to serving as the major business corridor in Ward One, Palm Beach Boulevard also is the main thoroughfare into the city from the Interstate. Therefore, the first impression many tourists make of our city is based on what they see along Palm Beach Boulevard. At the time, tourists weren't forming favorable impressions. There was no consistent landscaping (Fort Myers is dubbed the "City of Palms" after all) and street lighting was poor.

Lastly, communication and partnerships were almost non-existent. Although more than 90 percent of all the businesses in Ward One are located along the Palm Beach Boulevard corridor, there was not a single business alliance. In addition, the limited number

of Neighborhood Watch groups were not very active, nor did they work together. As with the businesses, residents were not united. Likewise, we must admit the City of Fort Myers did not do a good job of communicating within the various city departments. For example, the police, public works and code enforcement departments all were going about their respective jobs without working together effectively. As you can see, there were no community partnerships in Ward One.

Although the Fort Myers Police Department identified a number of problems, which we outlined above, the three overriding concerns were crime, blight and communication. We prioritized those in reverse order. Our first goal was to increase communication and partnerships so we could work more effectively and efficiently. Next we aimed to improve the appearance of Ward One. Since blight was a root cause of crime, it wouldn't do any good to fight crime without first fighting blight. Lastly, we wanted to tackle each of our individual crime problems, with long-term solutions.

The underlying goal was to enhance quality of life issues addressed by the community and to encourage participation. We hoped to develop strategies that would satisfy the goals and mission of the police department, and the citizens we serve, as well as to facilitate durable community partnerships while generating interest and enthusiasm.

Analysis:

The Fort Myers Police Department initially became interested in tackling the Ward One problem after analyzing crime statistics. As mentioned above, the City of Fort Myers was experiencing a decrease in crime city wide since the early 1990s. In the mid 1990's the agency launched a citywide community policing initiative, which included one officer

assigned exclusively to Ward One. Initially, Ward One was experiencing the same downward trend. But the trend did not continue.

The most significant crimes reported in Ward One were burglary, robbery and auto theft. In 1999, those three crimes increased in Ward One disproportionately from the city as a whole. While burglaries, robberies and auto thefts held steady throughout the city, they increased 3 percent in Ward One. (See Appendix 1)

A further study of crime statistics found that the vast majority of crime occurred in a small section of Ward One. The ward is geographically broken down into 20 smaller grids. Of those 20, the majority of crime occurred in just three grids. Even further, we discovered three particular apartment complexes were the root of many problems. Statistics also showed that Ward One suffered from a disproportionate amount of prostitution as well. Although Ward One geographically amasses about 18 percent of the city, 36 percent of all prostitution arrests were made in Ward One in 1998. (See Appendix 2)

The next step to analyze the Ward One situation was to consider this dilemma. Crime was down in the city, but up in Ward One. Even with an active community policing program, Ward One hadn't benefited at the same pace as the city as a whole. After discussing it in great depth with police officers, business leaders, residents and city officials, the answer became obvious - the blight. Perhaps the root cause of the crime problem was the fact that the community was run-down and encouraging the criminal element.

The results of the crime and blight weren't simply crime statistics and unsightly neighborhoods. The citizens of Ward One paid the price as well. They suffered from a poor perception of safety, a diminished quality of life and an attitude of distrust for authorities.

After all, no one was helping them. Officer Titmuss heard these themes over and over as he surveyed the concerns and attitudes of residents and business leaders.

The Fort Myers Police Department considered stepping up enforcement of crime in Ward One as one possible solution to the problem, but decided this had been ineffective by itself. If the root of the problem was the blight, enforcement would only perpetuate the problem, not solve it. And to tackle the disease of blight was something the agency couldn't do alone. Therefore, we decided the best strategy would be to form community partnerships first, clean up the neighborhoods second and then target specific crime problems.

Despite the negative attitudes among Ward One citizens, Officer Titmuss found that they were willing to become part of the solution. They clearly wanted things to change, but needed someone to lead the way. Businesses hoped for a better community to prosper in and an enhanced appearance to the gateway to Fort Myers. And residents clearly wanted a better place to live. Officer Titmuss and the Fort Myers Police Department collectively became the catalyst for change.

Response:

Launching community partnerships was the first phase of our project. The Ward One business community was quick to form the Palm Beach Boulevard Business Development Corporation. The group began meeting regularly and had two initial goals. First, the businesses sought to "police themselves" in a sense. They tackled businesses that had fallen into disrepair and encouraged owners to fix their properties up. Second, they began lobbying governmental bodies to win funding and support for projects.

Like the business owners, residents were quick to unite. Many Neighborhood Watch groups were formed and existing watches became more active. The number of active groups jumped from six to 16. The groups met regularly, set goals and figured out ways to accomplish them.

A significant number of apartment complexes are located in Ward One. Historically Neighborhood Watch groups haven't taken hold in apartment complexes. So, police went instead to apartment managers. The managers at many complexes then began meeting regularly to discuss problems they had in common and to find solutions.

The City of Fort Myers government also united. Rather than working independently, the police, code enforcement, public works, planning and fire departments all began working jointly. We also sought the assistance of outside governmental agencies that had a vested interest in Ward One, such as Animal Control, the Lee County Sheriffs Office and other county government agencies.

One of the most successful partnerships formed in Ward One made the opening of an important community center possible. In July 2000, the U-Save Corporation donated a building along the Palm Beach Boulevard corridor that became the "home base" for the Fort Myers Police Department's community policing officers, the Palm Beach Boulevard Development Corporation and the Fort Myers Police Athletic League, which is a youth activities program sponsored by the police department. The community center includes office space for police and business leaders, as well as recreational area of the children who participate with PAL. PAL is renovating the building for boxing training, a workout center, after school programs, a computer and game room and special events. The goal is to make the center a 24-hour a day "safe haven," for young people.

With partnerships clearly in place, the Fort Myers Police Department set out with its partners to clean up Ward One. Starting in the worst grid hardest hit with crime, the agency launched "Project Pride Code Sweeps." In four short hours, more than 30 police officers, code workers, animal control employees, demolition crews and rapid response clean-up crews blanketed a several block neighborhood. The group looked for code violations, animal violations and properties in need of immediate clean up. Rather than cite residents for violations, they gave them written warnings and a deadline to make repairs or face fines. The goal was not to write citations, but to get residents to voluntarily comply. Each and every home in the target area was inspected. Workers talked personally to each resident who was home, and left educational materials about code enforcement and crime prevention at all homes. Abandoned cars were "tagged" with warning that forced owners to move them or face towing. Vacant lots that were in particularly bad shape were immediately cleaned up by a city ordinance that allows the city to do the work, but bill the property owner. Dilapidated homes also were demolished. And the local media positively conveyed what we were trying to accomplish.

The agency dubbed the code sweep "Project Pride," because we hoped by encouraging the clean up, residents would begin to take pride in their neighborhoods. Eventually, five code sweeps were coordinated throughout Ward One. When all was said and done, the statistics were quite impressive:

- 233 abandoned were removed - voluntarily or by towing
- 123 code violations were cited and later corrected
- 69 vacant lots were mowed, cleared and cleaned up
- 45 abandoned shopping carts were returned to shopping centers

- 26 animal control violations were cited and corrected
 - 6 homes were deemed unsafe and posted for no trespassing
 - 5 condemned homes were demolished
- + And immeasurable amounts of trash and debris were removed from fields, ditches and vacant lots and legally disposed off

The sweeps were high in visibility, and police were concerned they could potentially become an annoyance to residents. We were, after all, forcing residents to invest time and money into cleaning up their property. But the most rewarding sign of the success of the code sweeps was not the impressive statistics. It was the fact that not once, during any of the sweeps, did any residents complain. How better could we measure the desire among residents to do their part to improve the quality of life in their community? We believe this was possible because residents, business leaders and the media all were involved. Residents and business leaders helped police spread the word before sweeps so citizens weren't caught off guard. And the media was particularly helpful in broadcasting and publishing stories not just about our actions, but our goals. Rather than appearing to be "big brother," residents realized we simply were empowering them to be part of the solution.

From a crime and juvenile delinquency standpoint, the biggest focus was an initiative supported by Fort Myers Police Department, but fostered from new partnerships. Ward One residents were equally frustrated with unruly juveniles on the streets late at night and during the day when they should be in school. So residents led a drive to enact a curfew in their community. More than 600 people signed petitions in support of the move and the police department gladly presented them to the City Council. With the backing of both residents and police, the City Council unanimously adopted a Youth Protection Ordinance. The

ordinance sets times young people can't be on the streets and must be at home: after 11 p.m. on school nights and midnight on weekends. The ordinance also applies to the hours children are in school. Police certainly wanted to see the ordinance enacted, but what made it successful was the fact that residents were the driving force. The newly revitalized Neighborhood Watch groups were the perfect vehicle for spreading the petitions and collecting signatures. The ordinance has become an important tool for police to use in keeping juveniles safe and in their homes - where they can't become a crime victim or get themselves into trouble.

One of the biggest tools police used to fight the rise in Ward One crime was the agency's Crime Prevention Specialist. Ms. Kathy Sullen stepped up her efforts to host crime prevention seminars with Neighborhood Watch groups, businesses and apartment managers. In addition, she had crime prevention brochures printed in both English and Spanish.

At the same time, Ms. Sullen and Officer Titnuss worked very hard with Hispanic community leaders to educate Hispanic residents on how they could prevent becoming robbery and burglary victims. They utilized a Spanish-speaking bank executive to explain to residents about the banking system and how it could help protect them from crime. Lastly, Ms. Sullen increased her monitoring of convenience stores in Ward One to ensure they were abiding by all rules and regulations, particularly the crime prevention components.

The Fort Myers Police Department's Intensive Neighborhood Patrol became another important crime prevention tool in Ward One. The Intensive Neighborhood Patrol (INP) program utilizes part-time civilian employees to help patrol the city streets. INP employees are trained in spotting suspicious activity and in communicating with police via the police radio. Next they are asked to patrol the city's residential neighborhoods and business

districts to look for suspicious or criminal activity. The INP employees are never put in confrontational situations, nor do they take reports of crime. They simply are extra sets of eyes and ears for police officers. When they spot something suspicious, they call for officers to investigate. Their work is helping stop suspicious activity from becoming a crime and to catch criminals in the act. INP employees also are very helpful in fostering a good rapport with residents. As they patrol, they stop and talk to residents they see on the streets. By getting to know the people in the neighborhoods, they help learn what problems exist, so they can be addressed. INP employees, who are assigned to the same city ward in which they live aim to patrol all residential neighborhoods and business districts several times a day. They also are utilized in "hot spots" identified by high crime statistics.

Officer Titmuss and the rest of the agency's community policing officers also spend a significant amount of time "hitting hot spots." Officer Titmuss carefully watches crime statistics in Ward One on a daily basis. When he notices one particular area hard hit by crime, he focuses his efforts there. From aggressive patrols and enforcement to working with residents to help lessen their susceptibility to crime, Officer Titmuss coordinated his fellow community policing officers to help battle hot spots. Utilizing the concept of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) was very effective in hot spots. Officers surveyed the homes and businesses in hard hit areas to see if there was anything that could be changed to help minimize susceptibility to crime. Officer Titmuss also shares information about hot spots with the patrol officers who are assigned to Ward One, so they also can help step up patrols in these areas.

The individual ideas and programs initiated in Ward One are not unique. Other communities across the country, for example, have initiated teen curfews. Other law

enforcement agencies have increased their efforts to provide crime prevention seminars. In fact, the Fort Myers police officers who designed the Ward One project drew on examples of problem-oriented policing from around the country. But what we believe made this project unique was the comprehensive nature of what we set out to do and the totality of the project we launched. Utilizing every resource possible, we built successful partnerships, we cleaned the community and then we fought crime. Combining all those components was both unique and the key to its success.

Assessment:

The "Crime and Blight in Ward One" project is still underway at the Fort Myers Police Department. The agency initiated the project a little over a year ago, and plans to continue it at least another year. However, the level of success has been phenomenal.:

- **Partnerships/communication:** The business community formed the powerful Palm Beach Boulevard Business Development Corporation. Residents increased the number and the activity of Neighborhood Watch groups from six active groups to 16. And police now work on a daily basis beside the other city departments and government agencies with a stake in Ward One.
- **Blight:** The Ward One community looks better than ever before. The sad thing is that there's no way to quantify the ascetics of a neighborhood. But we see it everyday. The Palm Beach Boulevard corridor is beautifully landscaped and decorative street lights were added. Neighborhoods and run-down properties - both residential and commercial - have been cleaned up. Again, it's significant that not one single resident or business owner complained about the crackdown on code violations. If

you talk to residents and business leaders they'll tell you they notice a significant improvement in how Ward One looks.

- **Crime:** Simply stated, crime is down in Ward One. Burglaries, robberies and auto thefts collectively decreased 5 percent in 2000, despite an increase in those crimes citywide last year. Prostitution arrests decreased from 24 in 1998 to 9 in 2000. Rather than accounting for 36 percent of the city's prostitution arrests, only 18 percent of 2000 prostitution arrests occurred in Ward One in 2000. Hispanic residents also are victimized less. Unfortunately because of changes currently being made to the agency's computer system, exact figures on crimes against Hispanic victims is not available. But officers on the streets will tell you they are down. With successful partnerships in place and a significant improvement in the appearance of Ward One, we predict these numbers will continue to decline in 2001.

It is difficult to assess whether the emphasis on Ward One has displaced crime to other areas in the City of Fort Myers. We know prostitution has been displaced because we don't typically see prostitutes walking the streets in Ward One any more, but we do see them in other areas of the county. But other types of crimes are more difficult to see. However, we are optimistic we are doing more to eliminate crime than displace it because crime overall in the City of Fort Myers held steady in 2000.

Although the amount of resources needed to initiate our Ward One project was significant, the plan was relatively "easy" to do. The community was ripe for change. Businesses and residents both were ready for things to happen. They simply needed the leadership to do it. That was the overriding role the Fort Myers Police Department played.

We most certainly didn't do it alone; nor could we have been successful if we did. We simply provided the tools and leadership to get things done.

The Fort Myers Police Department looks forward to continuing this project in 2001. In many ways, we could potentially achieve even more this year, considering we already have successful partnerships formed and communication has never been better. United we can accomplish much more, and that's exactly what we plan to do.

AGENCY AND OFFICER
INFORMATION

"Crime and Blight In Ward One"

Fort Myers, Florida

The "Crime and Blight in Ward One" project was initiated as part of the Fort Myers Police Department's Community Policing Unit. Specifically, the project was coordinated by Officer Michael Titmuss and Sergeant Douglas Baker. Officer Titmuss is a 10-year veteran of the agency who has been assigned to community policing for half of his career. Sgt. Baker has been with the agency for 15 years and assigned as the community policing supervisor for the past two years.

When needed, Officer Titmuss could call upon the other six community policing officers, the five officers assigned to public housing (who are part of the community policing team) the crime prevention practitioner and the six employees of the Intensive Neighborhood Patrol program for assistance. In addition, Major Hilton Daniels, the agency's Assistant Chief, aided in the coordination of the project both internally and as the coordinator with the other city department heads involved. Officer Titmuss had the full support of the entire City of Fort Myers government and its resources.

All of the community policing coordinators and the crime prevention practitioner have been fully trained in the concept of problem oriented policing, the SARA Model and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). They did not receive any additional training prior to the initiation of the project, but relied on their knowledge of problem-oriented policing quite heavily. While working on the project, officers were not afforded any additional incentives.

In addition, no additional funding was available to them. They accomplished this project exclusively with on-duty time and flexed their schedules as necessary. All funding was paid for with the existing departmental budget or donations from the community.

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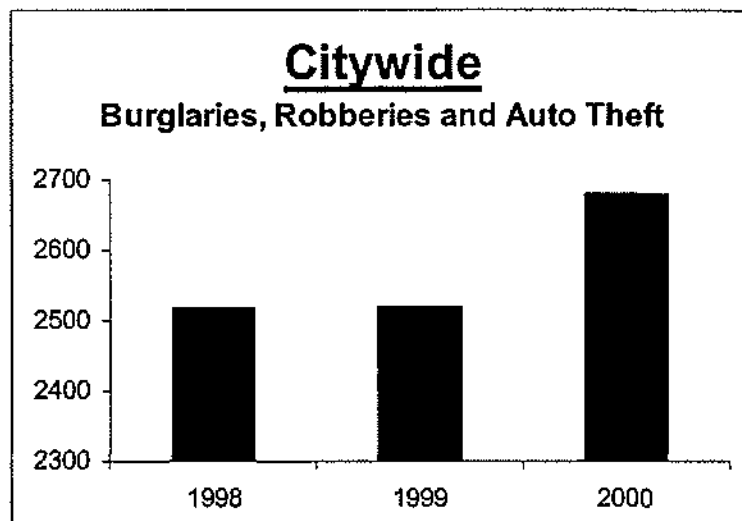
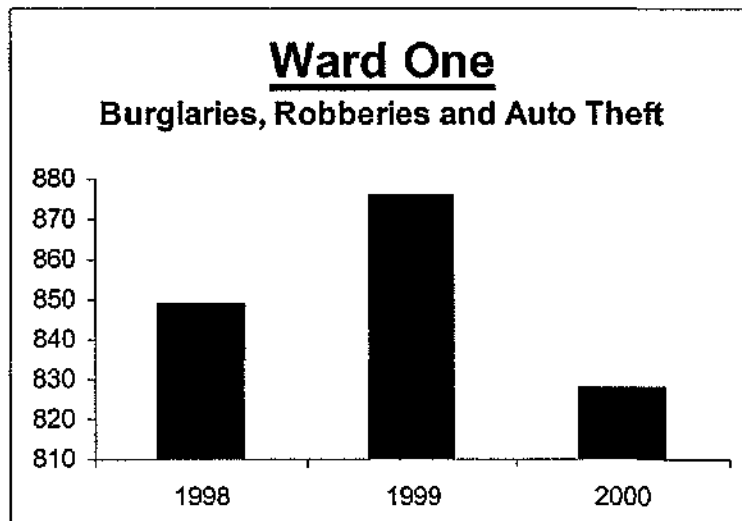
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Appendix 1

The year prior to the initiation of the "Crime and Blight in Ward One" project, burglaries, robberies and auto thefts increased in Ward One. They held steady during the same year across the *city* But during the first year of the project, the same crimes decreased in Ward One, while increasing city wide. Clearly, the project made a difference.



Appendix 2

In 1998, 36 percent of all prostitution arrests in the City of Fort Myers occurred in Ward One. By 2000, not only had the total number of prostitution arrests decreased, the percentage of those in Ward One also declined.

