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Narcotic Units Work in Rural Area

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**The Bill Blackwood
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Narcotic Units Work In Rural Area

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ABSTRACT

The idea that narcotic units work in rural areas is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because of the growing problems regarding the illegal use and sale of narcotics, which can serve as a catalyst for other crimes to occur. Crimes such as thefts, robberies, assaults, sexual assaults and child abuse are just a few. The purpose of this research is to determine if small rural law enforcement agencies can have a productive and successful narcotics unit, while at the same time having a positive impact on the rural police agency's reputation.

The method of inquiry used by the researcher included a review of articles, periodicals, and journals; conducting a survey distributed to twenty-four (24) police agencies to determine the locale's demographics and crime statistics; conducting interviews of various law enforcement personnel; and a reliance on direct professional experience as an undercover drug enforcement officer.

The researcher discovered that small rural law enforcement agencies cannot support a productive and successful narcotic unit if several determining factors do not exist. First, it must be demonstrated that there is a need for a narcotics unit. There must be some evidence indicating that substance abuse is a problem and that there is a correlation to criminal activity and substance abuse. Second, the agency must identify what resources are available and needed to implement such a unit. Third, if funding and resources are limited, which they most notably are in rural communities, then a multi-agency task force is needed and must be mobilized to offer assistance to the rural agency.

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INTRODUCTION

Rural America is transforming in dramatic fashion. Regardless of whether rural communities are declining or growing, all have to address the impacts of various conditions such as globalization, the emergence of new land use patterns, shifting demographics, and challenging issues of law enforcement, specifically substance abuse. Many reports and statistics show that rural and urban places today have very similar rates of substance use and abuse, and, for abuse of some substances, rural Americans are at an even higher risk than their urban counterparts.

Rural America is not immune to city problems, but rural people and places are beginning to face similar challenges. The relative remoteness and quiet lifestyles in rural areas and small towns can provide ideal opportunities for drug activity especially methamphetamine production. Studies have shown that rural areas are experiencing drug and crime problems similar to urban centers. The small tax bases in these communities, however, offer fewer resources to fight these problems. The funds available to maintain public services are increasingly unavailable due to diminishing tax bases. In addition, drug-related federal funding sometimes favors urban areas.

Furthermore, rural law enforcement officers are often not properly prepared to fight the increasing drug abuse and production. Rural police officers often lack the basic resources, such as back-up systems and statewide computer databases or other national networking technologies. In some rural areas, there are no local law enforcement agencies. In those cases, state agencies, which may not be very familiar with these areas, are in charge of law enforcement, or interagency/multi-jurisdictional cooperation across jurisdictional boundaries are required.

In light of these dire circumstances, this paper looks at how rural law enforcement agencies can support a productive and successful narcotics unit. This paper will demonstrate that if a number of conditions are present, then such a program is viable, and can be beneficial in the fight against drugs and drug-related crime. First, there must exist a demonstrated need for a narcotics unit. Surveys of local hospitals must be conducted to determine if there is a controlled substance abuse problem. Crime statistics must be reviewed and a determination made as to whether or not there is a correlation between the crime rates and substance abuse. Secondly, an assessment of the local law enforcement agency resources and manpower must be undertaken to determine if a one department narcotic unit or a multi-agency task force is appropriate. Thirdly, financial resources must be available. Without adequate funding, a successful narcotics unit cannot be supported.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The illicit drug trade carries the largest societal, political, and economic consequences. It threatens the fabric of societies through addiction and crime. It can further increase corruption in already weak communities, thereby impairing a community's economic and political functioning. Organized crime is often involved in the drug culture. The drug trade in particular, holds a substantial disruptive and corrupting power over the political and socio-economic spectrum, with implications for the long term viability of a rural locale. Organized crime and the drug trade culture are attracted to rural areas due to the oftentimes weakened ability of a locales power to uphold law and order.

According to data released from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), drug use increased in 1979, while declining significantly throughout the 1980s. However, a resurgence in drug use occurred in the late 1990s. By 2003, the trend further provided evidence that drug use was on the rise again. Figure 1 shows the dramatic change in the relative rates of rural and urban drug use.

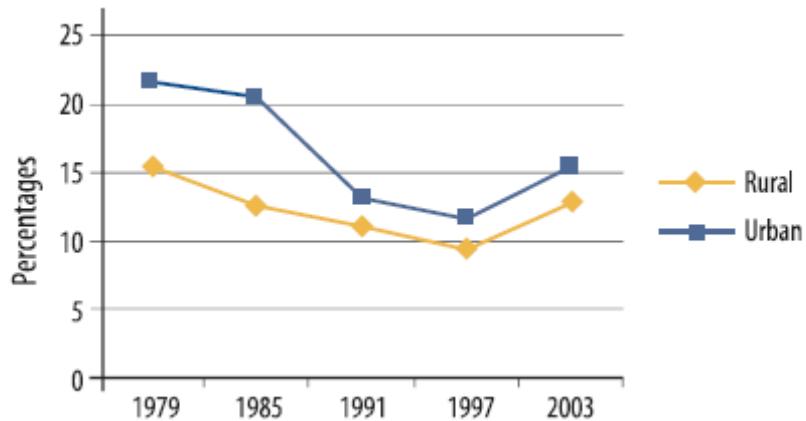


Figure 1: Trends in Illicit Drug Use among Rural and Urban U.S. Residents (NSDUH 1979-2003)

Thirty-one percent of all state and local law enforcement agencies consider methamphetamine their primary drug threat and 58 percent consider the availability of the drug in their communities to range from medium to high. While methamphetamine was once an urban phenomenon, it is no more. Rural areas across America are dealing with its effects. The methamphetamine epidemic continues to have a devastating effect in many of our communities. So, not only is the use of the drug spreading from the West to the East, it is also affecting all types of communities including urban, rural and suburban communities.

The rise of methamphetamine abuse and small-scale production during the 1990s has been a particular concern for rural communities nationwide. These areas have historically been viewed as immune to the “urban problem” of drug abuse. It is now evident that methamphetamine has penetrated rural America, leaving these communities in dire straits to find a solution.

Rates of methamphetamine use were fairly comparable for rural and urban Americans until 2003, when differences seemed to emerge. As Figure 2 shows, rural/urban differences seem to re-emerge in 2003. Prior to 2003, methamphetamine use rates were essentially equivalent for rural and urban residents. The results of the 2003 survey indicate that nearly eight out of every thousand rural Americans self-reported methamphetamine use, which is compared to about five out of every thousand in urban areas.

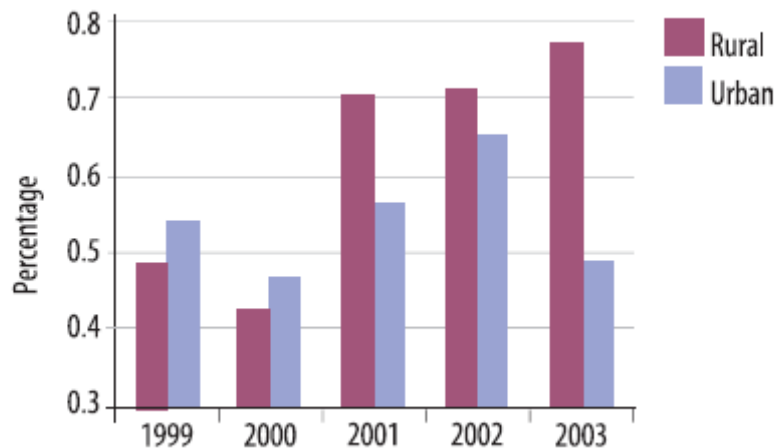


Figure 2: Meth Use Among Rural and Urban U.S. Residents (NSDUH 1999-2003)

There is overwhelming evidence supporting that methamphetamine has become the number one illegal substance. Furthermore, its users and users of other types of drugs are associated with violence. The Office of National Drug Control Policy's fact

sheet on drug-related crime concluded that drug users are more likely than non-users to commit crimes that arrestees were frequently under the influence of a drug at the time they committed their offense, and that drugs generate violence.

In June 2006, the National Association of Counties conducted a telephone survey of county law enforcement agencies to determine the criminal effect of methamphetamine on communities. Responses were received from 500 sheriffs in 44 states, including Texas. The results of the survey reveal that Methamphetamine continues to be one of the largest problems in America, more than cocaine, marijuana and heroin combined. The survey concluded that more than half of the counties surveyed with populations below 50,000 indicate that methamphetamine is the primary drug problem in their counties, thus reaffirming the historical trend of the popularity of methamphetamine in more rural areas.

As methamphetamine use increases, crimes related to methamphetamine continue to grow. Of the law enforcement officials surveyed, a majority reported increases in robberies or burglaries and an increase in domestic violence. Methamphetamine related arrests continued to represent a high proportion of criminal activity requiring incarceration. The crime of identity theft has also grown at a disproportionate amount according to this survey.

According to a 1991 joint survey of federal and state and prison inmates, an estimated 17% of state prisoners and 10% of federal prisoners reported committing their offense to get money to buy drugs. In 1997, this rate increased to 19% of state prisoners and 16% of federal prisoners. Trafficking of illicit drugs also tends to be associated with the commission of violent crimes. Many statistics provide further

evidence that drugs also remain one of the factors leading to the total number of homicides each year.

The link between substance abuse and crime is not a new phenomenon. The same study indicated that drug-related crimes in cities decreased by 11.2 percent between 1997 and 2002, in rural areas there was a 10.5 percent increase in drug crimes. Furthermore, small towns with fewer than 10,000 residents reported six times more drug law violations than larger cities between 1990 and 1998.

METHODOLOGY

This purpose of this research is to explore whether or not a rural area can have a successful narcotics unit. The researcher believes that undoubtedly there is a need for rural communities to combat the increasing problem of narcotics and substance abuse. This paper will seek to determine whether rural areas can sustain a functional single-agency narcotics unit or if a multi-agency unit is necessary.

In an effort to make this determination, research for this paper included a questionnaire to twenty-four police agencies operating in cities of varying size and crime rates. Questions included the following: the name of City/Town, the population of City/Town, number of employees in the Police Department, and whether or not the agency being surveyed has a narcotics unit in place?

In addition, Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) were requested of these twenty-four police agencies. The statistics provided in the UCRs included murder, rape, robbery, assault, burglary, larceny theft and motor vehicle theft. The response rate to the survey instrument resulted in 6 out of 24 (25 percent) responding to the survey. Of the six agencies that provided crime statistics, four had Narcotics Units and none were located

in cities with a population below 10,000. The information obtained from the survey (see tables) was analyzed by comparing the crime rates to the cities that have Narcotics Units to those that didn't.

City	Population	Size of Police Department	Narcotics Unit
Allen	77,000	106	Yes
Angleton	2,0000	65	Yes
Arlington	320,000	580	Yes
Azle	10,000	28	No
Bridgeport	5,400	24	No
Collin County	630,000	300	Yes
Decatur	5,500	18	No
Floresville	7,893	15	No
Flower Mound	65,000	70	Yes
Houston	3,500,000	4000	Yes
Luling	6,000	18	No
Mesquite	136,000	220	Yes
North Richland Hills	70,000	109	Yes
Pflugerville	40,000	52	Yes
Round Rock	90,000	140	Yes
Rowlett	54,000	79	Yes
Shenandoah	3,300	25	Yes
Trophy Club	7,800	17	No
Tyler	95,000	190	Yes
Uvalde	18,000	55	Yes
Wharton	10,000	35	Yes

Table I: Survey Results of Twenty-four (24) Police Agencies located in cities of Varying Sizes, Population

Criminal Offenses	Allen			Decatur			Round Rock			Rowlett			Trophy Club			Wharton		
	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006
Homicide	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	3	0	0	0	1	0	0
Rape	15	11	9	3	2	2	16	21	20	15	7	9	0	0	0	5	12	0
Robbery	10	14	14	2	0	2	19	24	46	10	18	13	0	2	2	19	13	0
Assault	390	397	429	72	65	82	59	76	975	558	518	485	33	24	24	430	37	0
Burglary	330	284	322	44	21	42	264	281	506	267	190	243	9	10	10	139	126	0
Larceny-Theft	1108	1185	1514	229	210	219	1361	1873	1706	932	802	870	32	58	58	443	369	0
Motor Vehicle Theft	53	56	75	15	20	17	47	51	194	62	94	73	3	3	3	28	25	0
TOTAL	1906	1948	2363	365	319	364	1766	2326	3447	1846	1629	1696	0	77	97	1065	582	0

Table II: Uniform Crime Report Statistics of Cities Surveyed, 2004-2006

FINDINGS

Of the agencies surveyed, those with populations less than 10,000 did not have a Narcotics Unit. Additional crime statistics from the other agencies surveyed could provide a correlation of whether or not increases or decreases in crimes appeared to be impacted by the presence of Narcotics Unit. However, substance abuse does appear to be a problem in cities with populations above 10,000, as is evidenced by the presence of a Narcotics Unit. Substance abuse may be a problem in rural areas, but without additional crime statistics, no conclusions can be drawn from information provided.

The City of Bridgeport's population is nearly 5,500 and they currently have no Narcotics Unit. However, in speaking with a local enforcement administrator with the City of Bridgeport, a Narcotics Unit is necessary and would be ideal. The administrator also indicated that the City would not be interested in becoming a member of a multi-agency unit due to the fact the Administrator indicated that they would want full control over the unit, in terms of how money is spent and investigations and personnel issues are handled. The Administrator indicated that funding would be sought through grants and possibly special funding from the City.

The City of Decatur's population is nearly 6,000. The researcher is employed as a Sergeant for the City of Decatur. The following information was obtained through the personal experience of the researcher and an interview with Decatur's Chief of Police. Drugs are believed to be a problem in Decatur due to the number of citizen complaints received, the perceived increases in drug-related activity, and the increase in methamphetamine arrests. According to Decatur's Chief of Police, Decatur was at one

time described as the Drug Capital of Texas by other law enforcement agencies. The City of Decatur is located at the confluence of two major highways: US Highway 380 and US Highway 81/287. US Highway 81/287 is a major thoroughfare that stretches as far south as Corsicana and as far north as Colorado. In light of this, it is a major trafficking route. At one time, Decatur had a detective dedicated as the City's Narcotic Unit. The program ended because the Detective was promoted to Sergeant but largely due to the financial hardships of trying to sustain such a Unit. According to Chief Hoskins, the absence of man power and personnel and the lack of funding to hire experienced personnel resulted in the Unit being cut. There was also, at one time, multi-jurisdictional drug task force in which the City participated in. This Task Force was disbanded several years ago due to internal issues and funding.

Currently, the City of Decatur Police Department combats the drug problem by increasing patrols in high drug trafficking areas, while aggressively enforcing traffic laws and violations in high drug trafficking areas. Other alternative investigations, such as surveillance of motels and other known drug areas, "trash runs", etc. are also pursued.

Of the six agencies that responded to the researcher's request for UCR data, four had Narcotics Units (Allen, Round Rock, Rowlett and Wharton). Only two of the agencies with Narcotics Units demonstrated a decline in crime statistics: Rowlett and Wharton. The other two cities with Narcotics Units are experiencing unprecedented growth and demographic shifts, which may account for the increase in crime. Only two cities that responded had populations below 10,000: Decatur and Trophy Club. Neither of these agencies have Narcotics Units. However, the researcher's professional experience with the City of Decatur's law enforcement agency and the growth that

Decatur is currently experiencing clearly indicate that there is drug problem and that there is a need for a Narcotics Unit, but the monies needed to fund a single Narcotics Unit is not available.

Based on the literature reviewed there is evidence from emergency departments and treatment programs attesting to the growing impact of methamphetamine abuse in the country. Greater than 50 percent increases in the number of emergency department visits related to methamphetamine abuse have been reported between 1995 and 2002 nationally. Treatment admissions for methamphetamine abuse have also increased. This increased involvement has been spreading nationwide. In 1992, only five states reported high rates of treatment admissions, and by 2002, this number had increased to twenty-one, which is more than a third of the states. An additional survey of local hospitals and treatment facilities may be necessary to provide further data in determining whether or not a drug problem exists.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered whether or not a rural area could sustain a successful narcotics unit that would combat drug related crimes. The purpose of this research was to determine if a rural narcotics unit could have a direct impact on drug related crimes and to also determine if the unit could be a single or multi-agency unit. The research question that was examined focused on the number of police agency of various sizes that had narcotics units, the population of the cities that had the narcotics unit, and to note any differences in the uniformed crime reporting between the agencies that had narcotics units.

The researcher hypothesized that rural agencies do need a Narcotics Unit and that these units could be sustained in the long term. However, in order to do so, several factors need to be taken into account. The agency's size, the city's population, and whether the city had the finances to fund a Narcotics Unit. The researcher concluded from the findings that the rural police agencies could not have a single-department Narcotics Unit. In general, rural agencies do not have the finances to support a unit. The agencies need money to buy vehicles, surveillance equipment, and to purchase the narcotics. The long hours that it would take to conduct large investigations and the manpower needed to do the investigations would drain the local resources. The researcher has determined that the only way that rural agencies could support a true narcotics unit was to become a member of a multi-agency unit.

Small rural communities can see a dramatic reduction in crime across the board with the implementation of several new and revised policing strategies and initiatives coupled with organizational modifications. After a thorough examination and audit of the Department's finances, and resources, a department can more effectively begin implementing strategic and cost-effective modifications that can increase productivity, while improving and increasing the level of police services to the community. A coordinated policing initiative can all work in tandem with each other and should be developed and modified to adjust to the ever changing crime patterns.

The development of several major crime initiatives, such as a Vice Unit, Narcotics Unit and interagency partnerships can play a key role in rural communities. A Narcotics Unit should take a multi-faceted approach in attacking drug distribution organizations and to disrupt the market for drugs. Distribution should be addressed

through interdiction efforts within and outside the City limits. The unit's mission should focus on identifying, reducing controlling, and preventing organized crime, gang activity, illegal narcotic and vice related crime.

Funding may be received on a year to year basis by a federal grant. With a multi-agency task force, all of the participating agencies may provide an equal amount of funds to the program. With a small narcotics unit, an agency must decide if they need to employ the services of undercover officer from the local agency or hire from outside agencies. This can become a very critical issue in small communities. In many rural communities, the drug culture is very close. With a multi-agency unit, officers may be traded from one city to another with a minimal threat of having their cover blown. When hiring undercover officers, it is imperative to hire people who do not look or act like police officers. The researcher spent two years as an undercover police officer and discovered that this was one of the hardest things to become familiar with.

Written rules and regulations are necessary for the undercover officers to work. These rules and regulations must outline everything from a simple street level buy, to a more complex situation of a reversal. Reversal is where the undercover officer is posing as the drug dealer and selling the illegal drugs to the consumer. These situations take a lot of time and man power. With smaller agencies, the issue of money and spending the time needed to investigate one specific group of individuals can become costly and time consuming. A typical undercover investigation can take up to six months. The researcher, while operating undercover, typically performed three undercover "buy walks". "Buy walks" are where illegal narcotics are purchased and the seller is identified at a later date. The buy walks typically occur in three phases. With

each phase, the quantity of drugs being purchased by the undercover officer increases. The third phase involves the purchase of a very larger quantity of drugs than the normal buy and is when the bust occurs. During the third phase, the undercover officer introduces a different person. This third person is also an undercover officer. When the bust occurs, the original undercover officer acts as if he or she is unaware that the third person was a police officer. The third person is the arresting officer. This is done so that the original undercover officer's true identity is not found out until the day of court. In buy walks, the objective is to elevate the offenses to get a bigger penalty/charge assessed against the dealer. The prosecutor has more bargaining power for a longer prison term. These "buy walks" can take a great deal of time to occur and often require large sums of money to be spent up front.

There will always be the input of the federal and local prosecutors. They have an input as to which person they want to or can prosecute. Some people will be easier to prosecute than others. The problem with any undercover police operation is that on the outside looking in, it appears that nothing is getting done about the drug problem, especially when the guilty party is released or not convicted after an extensive undercover operation and/or because of insufficient evidence or because of some minor technicality. This can take a toll on the local police administration.

Statistically, it has been somewhat demonstrated that drugs and drug related crimes have a direct impact on the uniform crime report. In reality, the researcher's direct experience in a rural community and discussions with other law enforcement officers and peers in rural communities prove conclusively that there is a great need in rural communities for a Narcotics Unit. However, the results of the survey were limiting

and further study is needed. Limitations that hindered this study's results can be attributed to the fact that only a small number of agencies responded to the researcher's request for drug and crime statistics. Also the researcher was unable to obtain information and statistics from a police agency under 10,000 in population that had a true single-department narcotics unit.

Regardless of the limitations presented above, the study of narcotics unit in a rural area is relevant to contemporary law enforcement. No matter the size of a city or the geographic location of the city, all of America is battling the drug problem at various levels. All Americans stand to benefit from the results of this research. Illegal narcotics and the crimes associated with the sale and use of the drugs affects everyone...illegal narcotics have no boundaries.

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APPENDIX

SURVEY

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Decatur Texas 76234

This survey is optional

Please fill out the following survey and return to the above address.

Name of City / Town _____

Population of City / Town _____

Number of employees with in the Police Department _____

Do you have a Narcotics Unit _____

The information contained in this survey may or may not be used in a research paper for the Law Enforcement Management Institute Written by Gerald Wright

Thank you for your time

Gerald Wright