

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

**Crime Prevention Initiatives:
Special Operations Units**

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

**By
Mark Maret**

**Balch Springs Police Department
Balch Springs, Texas
September 2010**

ABSTRACT

Law enforcement is the utilization of various proven methods and practices developed over many years for maintaining order within society. One of the primary functions of law enforcement is to establish methods for crime prevention. Crime prevention involves identifying sources of crime and finding ways to eliminate or curb future crimes within the community. The value of well developed and useful crime prevention methods benefits many parties, not just the community in general, but law enforcement organizations, taxpayers, and potential victims of crime.

Police departments can prevent criminal activity by implementing a special operations unit and lower crime rate within a city. One of the more proven and effective crime prevention methods involves the establishment of a Special Operations Unit (SOU). Special Operations Units involve law enforcement organizations working with the community within their jurisdictions through many initiatives, including increased police presence, community crime watch groups, and enhanced enforcement efforts.

More, Wegener, and Miller (2003) claimed, "Community policing has been extolled as the panacea for all of the problems faced by law enforcement. It arrived with fanfare-supported by many national police organizations-and to a degree has taken the nation by storm" (p. 40). However, in order to conduct a successful community policing effort, a department must have the direct participation and support of the community. The joint efforts of a SOU and community neighborhood crime watch group can provide lasting, long-term solutions to targeted areas where problems of crimes exceed the other areas of the jurisdiction.

Many law enforcement personnel and criminologists have contributed to the crime prevention debate and causes of criminal behavior. Throughout the 20th century, some of these scholars and innovators have included August Vollmer, G.L. Keeling, O.W. Wilson, and G.J. Hawkins. Their theories and opinions have been incorporated as support for this paper, as well as other authoritative references on policing. Professional journals, periodicals, personal interviews, and textbooks have all been used to support the basis for this discussion.

Prevention is the primary function of law enforcement, and reducing violent crimes can be achieved through the implementation of a special operations unit. Directed police patrols increase police presence in targeted areas and provide deterrence for crime. The evidence for crime prevention through the creation of special operations units is supported by the numerous theories and sources that have experimented with deterrence and high visibility and succeeded in their efforts.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the primary functions of law enforcement is to establish methods for crime prevention. Crime prevention involves identifying sources of crime and finding ways to eliminate or curb future crimes within the community. The value of well developed and useful crime prevention methods benefits many parties, not just the community in general, but law enforcement organizations, taxpayers, and potential victims of crime.

To complicate matters for law enforcement, problems associated with the distribution and use of illegal drugs, weapons, other dangerous contraband, and organized gang activity has raised awareness and urgency about crime prevention to a higher level of serious concern. These are problems beyond ordinary patrol functions and require special considerations to manage. Many cities have created special task forces and operational units to deal directly with concerns of increased gang related activity and illegal drug trafficking. A special unit, designed, trained, and directed for a specific purpose, can provide a deterrent to crime and have a major impact on crime in targeted areas of any enforcement jurisdiction.

The creation and activation of a special unit of officers within a law enforcement organization, or specific police department, can lower the crime rate within the department's jurisdiction or city, thus allowing other resources to continue addressing specific emergency calls. One of the more proven and effective crime prevention methods involves the establishment of a Special Operations Unit (SOU) (Lt. M. Geron, personal communication, December 9, 2009). Special operations units require law enforcement organizations working with the community within their jurisdictions through many initiatives, including increased police presence, community crime watch groups,

and enhanced enforcement efforts. This joint effort usually requires additional department resources and training for the officers and citizens involved, but the benefits can include long-term savings for the department as a whole.

Reed (1995) stated, "Crimes occur because some particular individuals have both the desire and opportunity to commit crime" (p.1). Therefore, crime prevention must address the two major aspects of why crimes are committed. Law enforcement must eliminate the desire to commit a crime and eliminate opportunities for commencement of crimes. An SOU addresses both of these major aspects of crime.

An example of SOU success is the City of Dallas, Texas. With a 57% reduction in gang related violence in specifically targeted areas of Dallas, the first 12 months reflected a major success with this initiative (Fritsch, Caeti, & Taylor, 2003). The Dallas Police Department created two separate special operations units and has experienced successful results with both. One SOU unit was created in 1996 and was used for gang activity suppression. The second unit, the Dallas Disruption Unit, was created in 2005 and is used to saturate high crime neighborhood (Lt. M. Geron, personal communication, December 9, 2009).

Police departments should utilize special operations units within the city. The deterrence of crime is essentially the major goal of law enforcement. According to George Payton (1971), "Preventive enforcement falls under the heading of protection, and involves the prevention of crime through the noticeable presence of police vehicles and personnel as a form of deterrence. Prevention is the soundest of all criminological theories" (p.32). Special operations units are tasked with the goal of crime prevention through reducing the opportunities for criminal activity.

POSITION

Deterrence theory is still being debated today, but the first deterrence theory can be traced to utilitarian philosophers Cesare Beccaria (1748-94) and Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), who believed “that people are motivated fundamentally to obtain pleasure and avoid pain” (Stafford & Goodrum, 2001, p. 3550). According to deterrence theory, some criminals can be persuaded to cease their illicit activities if the pain is too great. The word pain refers not only to punishment for a crime, but the extent of trouble or work it takes to commit a criminal act, with the possibility of evading detection and apprehension. The establishment of a Special Operations Unit (SOU) can be responsible for causing criminals more trouble than it may be worth to commit certain crimes in specific targeted areas.

The general trend in sociology and criminology analysis of violent offenders supports the theory that most murders, assaulters, and, in some cases, rapists, are rarely arrested for the previously committed offense. These violent offenders do not consider themselves career criminals and rarely do they make a career out of murder and assault (Clinard, Quinney, & Wildeman, 1986). After analyzing this theory, it could be presumed that stopping a violent crime the first time it is attempted could possibly lead to preventing the crime from ever taking place, now or in the future. Being in the right place at the right time can possibly save lives and keep potential violent offenders from having to be arrested to start with. Directed patrols can make such an impact.

When an SOU is established, there are three main tasks that must be assigned to the SOU. The first tasks assigned to the SOU is to direct a specialized, trained group of officers into high crime areas, saturating the area for a specific number of days,

weeks or months. This effort should increase the visibility of law enforcement to criminals and citizens alike. The public and potential offenders use uniformed police officers and marked patrol cars to measure police presence in a given area (Reed, 1995). The second function of the SOU is to establish a neighborhood watch group within the targeted area. This is an essential component of the SOU because without additional “eyes and ears” within the community, enhanced patrols may not be able to identify criminal elements unless they are caught in the act of committing a crime. The third function of the SOU is to provide follow up enforcement of targeted areas. After the enhanced enforcement areas have been directed to new targeted areas, neighborhood watch groups must still be active and follow up of enhanced enforcement must be directed back to targeted areas on a periodic basis. This follow up from the SOU may be weeks after the SOU has moved on to new targeted areas or months, depending on the success of the program.

Special Operations Units require the cooperation and coordination of multiple divisions within a police department. The SOU must coordinate not only within its own department, but the unit must also establish neighborhood crime watch groups in which there must be a coordination of information and enforcement efforts between the SOU and crime watch groups. Above all, follow up and training is critical for both officers and citizens involved in the effort of the SOU. One of the most important functions leading to success is the training of citizens in the neighborhood watch group. With proper training on how to look for and recognize suspicious activity, citizens can be instrumental in reporting such activity and have the important details necessary to assist

directed patrols. Appendix A, *Eyes of Rowlett*, provides some of the important details that are useful to law enforcement when reporting suspicious activity.

The SOU will generally become responsible for implementing a zero-tolerance policy towards all crime, regardless of the offense. Typically, this will entail an increase in traffic citations and enforcement of petty offenses in the targeted area. For example, increased citations in this goal are to make citizens and criminals aware that the SOU is there for citizen protection and crime prevention. In the early 1990s, a directed police patrol deterrence experiment was conducted by the Kansas City Police Department in Kansas. This involvement in increased traffic enforcement led to a “65% increase in seizures of illegal firearms, and an associated 49% decrease in gun-related crime” in the targeted areas (McGarrell, Chermak, Weiss, & Wilson, 2001, p. 119). Although these results are not guaranteed in each and every instance where directed police patrols are used, these statistics, with other supporting data, make a strong argument that directed police patrols are effective tools in preventing crime.

An SOU should be created in jurisdictions that can clearly identify a need for additional crime prevention. Although one cannot place too high a price on the safety of its citizens, police departments must give serious consideration to the cost-benefit of establishing a SOU. After proper analysis, a department may find it can make better use of resources for alternative crime prevention initiatives. In this instance, it could be explained that violent crime and property crimes are not serious enough to warrant a direct response or special action on the part of the department.

As an effective tool in preventing crime, an SOU is generally successful at reducing violent crime and property crimes, which can be illustrated by the Dallas Police

Department in Texas. The Dallas Disruption Unit, created in 2005, is patterned after a similar unit in Chicago, Illinois (Lt. M. Geron, personal communication, December 9, 2009). As of August 7, 2009, the City of Dallas has experienced a 23% drop in violent crime in the roughest parts of Dallas from August 2008 to July 2009 (Miles, 2009). In most of the 26 targeted areas, the overall number of offenses committed or committed and detected, were significantly reduced, some as much as 63% from the year 2008 to 2009. The minimum reduction in crime reported by the Dallas Disruption Unit during this time period was a drop of 4%. Although most of the 26 targeted areas had substantial reductions in offenses, six had increases, and one had no change at all.

The success of the Dallas Disruption Unit may not necessarily be translated into just the targeted areas. Some of the highlights of the overall crime statistics of the City of Dallas since the implementation of the unit in 2005 through 2008 include a 45% reduction in aggravated assaults, a 15.8% reduction in homicides, and smaller reductions in incidents of burglary and robbery. (Appendix B).

The success of the Dallas Disruption Unit is not an isolated success story. Many law enforcement departments around the United States have either implemented similar SOU initiatives or created special operations units that have several divisions or special training and operational initiatives. Some of the best examples of these jurisdictions are shown below in Table A.

Table A. Departments Utilizing Special Operations Units

Police Agency	State
Chicago Police Department	Illinois
Kansas City Police Department	Kansas
King County Sheriff's Department	Washington
Los Angeles Police Department	California
New Bern Police Department	North Carolina
Rochester Police Department	New York
San Jose Police Department	California
Scranton Police Department	Pennsylvania

Firearms and drugs are major contributing factors in many violent crimes. It is common knowledge that illicit drug manufacturing, sales, and distribution have become big money makers for criminals in the United States. Drug dealers, almost always associated with gang activity, tend to be the major perpetrators of violent crimes. When directed police patrols, sometimes referred to as saturated patrols, are implemented in high crime areas, the opportunities for police officers to apprehend violators before they commit violent crimes is substantially increased. With a zero-tolerance policy, illegally possessed firearms and other contraband can be confiscated and removed from the streets, thus making neighborhoods potentially safer from violent crime.

The primary focus of the 1992-93 Kansas City Police Department quasi-experiment previously mentioned was to “identify and seize illegally possessed firearms pursuant to arrests, traffic stops, and investigations of suspicious persons” (McGarrell et al., 2001, p. 127). The analysis of this experiment was compared with a similar initiative implemented in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1997. The most striking result of the directed patrols was the drop in the number of homicides committed in Indianapolis. In the

targeted areas, 1996 statistics reflected 11 homicides. The homicides recorded for 1997 in the targeted areas were reduced to one (McGarrell et al., 2001).

Initiatives that begin with SOU implementation can have long-term results for the community, but after the units have moved on to other targeted areas, the neighborhood watch group helps to determine the continued success of the crime prevention program. Citizens assisting with patrols, communications with the police department regarding criminal activities, and suspicious behaviors increase the likelihood that the SOU will not have to target the same area on a continued basis (City of Rowlett, 2005). This applies to smaller communities rather than larger metropolis settings. Generally, larger cities will require continued enforcement and high visibility to be successful. But this can be achieved on a rotating basis, which, in turn, lowers the cost of the initiative.

COUNTER POSITION

Studies reflect that police saturation in targeted areas do not always translate into a drop in crime (Kelling, Pate, Dieckman, & Brown, 1974; Reed, 1995). The largest measure of the success of a SOU is the statistical drop in crime in the targeted area. Another measure of success is citizen fear of crime. If the fear of crime by citizens in a targeted area can be reduced, the resulting qualitative results can be validated with quantitative measures.

In a 1974 study in Kansas City, Missouri, the Kansas City Police department conducted an experiment on "Preventive Patrols." This study evaluated the potential reduction of crime by raising police patrols in various patrol beats. This evaluation was the first systematic attempt to ascertain the effectiveness of routine preventive patrol (Reed, 1995). Police patrols were increased in some areas, maintained at the pre-

experiment levels in others and some areas had police presence withdrawn and only available for calls. The study was conducted during the 12 month period between October 1, 1972 and September 30, 1973 and reflected statistical evidence that saturated police presence does not necessarily translate into a reduction in crime. The study further asserted the claim that “routine preventive patrol in marked police cars has little value in preventing crime or making citizens feel safe” (Kelling et al., 1974; Pate, Dieckman, & Brown, 1974, p. vii). The end result of the Kansas City preventive patrol research, according to David H. Bayley, was that the findings were generally accepted as being true, but the experiment’s research strategy is considered seriously flawed, and most police departments have ignored the results in favor of random patrols (Bayley, 1998).

Another argument against SOU creation is that the shift in police presence sends criminal elements into other jurisdictions to commit crime, therefore not eliminating crime or criminal elements but forcing potential crime onto other areas within the same city, outside the targeted areas, or to other cities and jurisdictions. The spillover effect, as the theory is known by, is somewhat supported by the data in the *Kansas City Preventative Patrol Experiment* (Kelling et al., 1974). This theory corresponds to the potential that where there is desire to commit crime, opportunities will be sought elsewhere. Based on the overwhelming number of findings that support targeted deterrence, the spillover effect theory has minimal support. In some cases, police patrols do not stop a crime in itself but change the location of the offense (Reed, 1995). A quasi-experiment conducted in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1997 provided some support for this position. Although homicide rates dropped in targeted areas for directed police

patrols, homicides increased for the remainder of the city by 53% from 1996 to 1997 (McGarrell et al., 2001, p. 137).

August Vollmer wrote on police services and police patrols in his 1936 book, *The Police and Modern Society*. In his book, Vollmer wrote “it [police patrols] is society’s best defense against the criminal. The mere sight of uniformed officials diligently patrolling beats is often sufficient to deter the community’s weaker members from committing legal infractions” (Reed, 1995, p. 7). Superintendent of the Chicago Police Department and influential leader in the field of policing, O.W. Wilson stated:

The apparent likelihood of arrest influences the degree to which the potential offender is convinced that the opportunity for successful misconduct is absent. Patrol provides this favorable influence more completely than any other branch of police service. An impression of omnipresence is created by frequent and conspicuous patrol at every hour and in all sections of immediate apprehensions is spread by press, radio, and word of mouth. The potential offender is thus persuaded without the necessity of personal experience that the patrol is invulnerable. (Reed, 1995, p. 8)

Directed police patrols have proven time and again that they can be a deterrent to crime. Reductions in violent crimes are generally the result of many studies completed on the establishment of a crime prevention initiative such as a special operations unit.

Retired Judge, Lois G. Forer, who spent 32 years practicing law, served as Deputy Attorney General in Pennsylvania, and served 16 years as criminal law judge, made several observations and conclusions about curbing criminal behavior. She illustrated a seven-point plan for combating crime and crime prevention. Her plan included gun control, education, restitution, and heavy fines. Also included were jobs for criminals, consistency in sentencing, and redress for victims. Her comments about

crime prevention and plans to address criminal behavior did not include increasing police forces, additional arrests, larger jails, or tougher judges (Bouza, 1993). Although she must have concluded that crime prevention should start with making an impact on family and social issues, her answers did not address the impact of additional police deterrence as a possible crime prevention method for potential criminal activity that does not respond to education, heavy fines, and the rest of her seven-point plan.

CONCLUSION

The patrol function has historically been viewed as what could be referred to as the backbone of policing, and “has been considered the most important and visible part of police work” (Peak, 2003, p. 117). Due to the proven success of numerous special operation units within the United States, police departments should create a special operations unit in order to lower the crime rate within their city. Prevention is the primary function of law enforcement, and it is integral in dealing with the rising crime related to violence, illegal drugs, and gang activity. Not only does increased police presence in a targeted area provide deterrence for crime, but this increase of presence provides more opportunities for officers to detect and apprehend offenders of other crimes.

The evidence for crime prevention through the creation of special operations units is supported by the numerous theories and sources that have experimented with deterrence and high visibility and succeeded in their efforts. The evidence suggested that simply adding more police officers and not providing direction for the use of those officers will have little, if any, effect on reducing crime (Fritsch et al., 2003). The involvement of the community is required, including communicating with police,

assisting in the efforts to deter and apprehend criminals, and making citizens more cognizant of potential criminal acts.

The statistical data against special operations units as an effective tool in crime prevention is minute in relation to the evidence that supports the success of increased police presence and enforcement initiatives. The statistics supporting the role of directed police patrols provides evidence that, almost anywhere in the United States, such programs can be successful in deterrence and providing safer communities. The conclusions of a 1974 mathematical study of direct deterrence revealed that police can provide saturation coverage, which heightens prevention for specific areas of the city, and patrol can “‘create the appearance of being everywhere at once’ by implementing a shifting-saturation strategy” (Riccio 1974, p. 215). A lasting benefit of special operations units is their ability to help revitalize neighborhoods by reducing crime and preventing criminals with opportunities to commit offenses. For those criminals that have the desire, SOU initiatives can deny potential criminals opportunity.

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APPENDIX A

Eyes of Rowlett

“An innovative community policing program, designed to provide emergency assistance, utilizing cell phones and existing two-way radio communications. The participants provide alert eyes and ears to law enforcement to significantly and cost-effectively enhance crime prevention and aid persons in need.” (Miller 2005, 1)

How to report a crime or suspicious activity:

- ✓ Use 9-1-1 to report an emergency or crime in progress.
- ✓ Be Calm. Identify yourself and your location.
- ✓ Give a complete description of suspect(s): Should include gender, race, age hair/eye color, weight/height, build, weapon, unusual characteristics.
- ✓ Give address or location of crime or suspicious activity. (Use landmarks)
- ✓ Give description of the crime or suspicious activity.
- ✓ Give description of the vehicle.
- ✓ Let the dispatcher know if there are any injuries.
- ✓ Let the dispatcher know if any weapons are involved.
- ✓ Limit access to a crime site until it can be secured by police and crime scene technicians in order to preserve evidence. (Miller 2005, 4-8)

APPENDIX B**City of Dallas, Texas Crime Statistics 2005-2008**

DALLAS POLICE DEPARTMENT UNIFORM CRIME REPORT YEAR 2005								
Population 1,230,303								
	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Auto Theft	Total
Number of offenses	202	562	6,882	7,783	22,363	52,315	14,277	104,202
Rate per 100,000	16.4	45.7	559.4	632.6	1,817.7	4,252.2	1,160	8,484.4
Offenses Cleared	150	293	1,302	3,158	1,818	9,613	1,209	17,543
Percent Cleared	74	52	19	41	8	18	8	17
Index Crime Arrests	44	118	616	1,266	860	4,307	1,492	8,703

DALLAS POLICE DEPARTMENT UNIFORM CRIME REPORT YEAR 2006								
Population 1,248,223								
	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Auto Theft	Total
Number of offenses	187	665	6,914	7,292	21,653	50,009	13,930	100,650
Rate per 100,000	15	53.3	553.9	584.2	1,734.7	4,006.4	1,116	8,063.5
Offenses Cleared	151	324	1,312	2,976	1,674	8,257	1,018	15,712
Percent Cleared	81	49	19	41	8	17	7	16
Index Crime Arrests	33	104	718	1,277	861	4,154	1,221	8,368

DALLAS POLICE DEPARTMENT UNIFORM CRIME REPORT YEAR 2007								
Population 1,239,104	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Auto Theft	Total
Number of offenses	200	511	7,222	5,315	22,472	47,699	13,791	97,210
Rate per 100,000	16.1	41.2	582.8	428.9	1,813.6	3,849.5	1,113	7,845.1
Offenses Cleared	116	299	1,252	2,241	1,433	8,520	1,302	15,163
Percent Cleared	58	59	18	42	7	18	10	16
Index Crime Arrests	22	104	786	1,012	933	4,465	951	8,273

DALLAS POLICE DEPARTMENT UNIFORM CRIME REPORT YEAR 2008								
Population 1,276,214	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Auto Theft	Total
Number of offenses	174	499	6,466	4,285	21,149	42,402	12,208	87,179
Rate per 100,000	13.3	39.1	506.7	335.8	1,657.2	3322.5	956.6	6,831.2
Offenses Cleared	111	305	1,153	1,942	1,626	7,800	1,296	13,933
Percent Cleared	65	61	18	45	6	18	11	16
Index Crime Arrests	11	100	705	1,156	1,026	4,410	716	8,124

(Texas Department of Public Safety, 2005-2008)