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School Safety



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Ronald D. Stephens, Executive Editor
 Stuart Greenbaum, Editor/Art Director
 Judy Rosenfeld, Associate Editor
 Monica Winegar, Composer

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About the cover:

This statue in front of the Philadelphia Police Administration Building exemplifies the positive relationship needed between law enforcers and youth. Photograph by Greg Lanier.

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 ACQUISITIONS

BY GARY HIGGINS

Community officials must look beyond "turf" issues and recognize the need to share information about serious juvenile offenders.

Serious habitual offenders – The bad apples

"The 1986 school year will begin with 89 serious habitual offenders enrolled, and anticipated to be present, in the school system."

This was the startling message from Sheriff Dale Carson to Herb Sang, superintendent of schools in Jacksonville, Florida. Sheriff Carson continued, "With each averaging 10 prior arrests, there is a high degree of certainty they will be re-arrested within 90 days for a crime at least as serious as the last."

And these habitual juvenile offenders had been arrested previously for very serious crimes, including murder, sexual battery, arson, robbery, armed burglary and aggravated assault. Sadly, every district has such students, although school officials may not know it.

Following Carson's revelation, his office, the State Attorney's office, the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, and the Duval County School Board agreed that these habitual offenders, "the worst of the worst," would be tracked, and the agencies which dealt with them would share information and develop new prevention, intervention and apprehension policies.

During the three years before the

1986 school term, Superintendent Sang had asked many important questions, some of which the Sheriff's Office could answer, some it could not. Once a school superintendent accepts the premise that there are serious habitual offenders in the district's schools, the next question is, "Do they threaten the order in the schools?" They do. The superintendent then will want to know who they are and what the district's responsibilities and liabilities are.

The Jacksonville Sheriff's Office was able to provide Superintendent Sang data on the offenders because of its participation in a federally funded initiative to deal with juvenile crime. The U.S. Department of Justice sponsors the Serious Habitual Offender/Drug Involved (SHO/DI) program which began in 1983 when Jacksonville's Sheriff's Office was asked to participate in an effort to generate new and improved policies for handling juveniles.

The department leadership hesitated. Juvenile matters always had been a source of frustration for law enforcement. However, Sheriff Carson felt strongly that something needed to be done, so he agreed his agency would become one of five pilot sites in the nation. (Jacksonville's partners in this effort are Portsmouth, Virginia; Colorado Springs, Colorado; and the California cities of Oxnard and San Jose.)

The selections were based primarily on two important factors. First, each site in previous work with the Justice Department had demonstrated use of innovative police practices. Each had devised systems for delivering police services that incorporated comprehensive information systems – including progressive records management and crime analysis capabilities – with the operational know-how to incorporate this information into new and improved policies at the street level.

A second consideration was the ability of the police administrator to handle a kind of "diplomatic risk management." Would the police chief be able to overcome resistance from organizations that had been dealing with juvenile matters for years? Sheriff Carson was willing to take the risk.

The plan was simple and straightforward: Build an information base, analyze it for program direction, and then develop policies and procedures on that base. Measures of the effectiveness of performance, impact, process, case tracking and management would be needed. It sounded simple enough on paper, but it proved more difficult than any of the project directors imagined. Knowing problems and resolving them are different matters.

Accordingly, data base development was the first order of business. Juvenile records nationally are a mess. They are

Gary Higgins is chief, Division of Planning and Research, for the Office of the Sheriff in Jacksonville, Florida.

incomplete, fragmented and difficult to retrieve because of poor records management and issues such as confidentiality.

Police officers themselves contribute to the problem. In the absence of a well-defined policy on juvenile matters, they are free to exercise discretion. In a system in which decisions are based on individual incidents rather than on the complete record of the offender, officers may contribute to the "revolving door" system. Often officers develop the perception and the accompanying attitude that "everyone who goes into detention gets out. If the rest of the juvenile justice system doesn't care, why should I?" This attitude may lead to decisions not to arrest, thereby saving on paperwork and aggravation. The result of such inaction is a reduction of information about juvenile crime, who is doing what, to whom and where.

But perhaps the single greatest obstacle in dealing with serious habitual juvenile offenders in Jacksonville was the lack of information sharing and cooperation among agencies serving or dealing with juveniles. Individually and collectively such agencies long believed that information could not or should not be shared, a belief resulting in maintenance of separate and usually incomplete files. This practice, discovered early in the project, resulted in a major focus. The goal was to develop a better information base to identify the "worst of the worst."

The result was the creation of Inter-Agency, which proved the most powerful tool available in getting together all the pieces of the information puzzle. Composed of members from law enforcement, the prosecutor's office, juvenile judges' offices, probation and service groups, and the school system, it enabled all involved agencies to share information which was "offender-oriented" rather than "incident-oriented."

The forum of Inter-Agency is still invaluable for policy review, information sharing and problem resolution. Infor-

mation about truancy, referral rates for absence, tardiness, behavior problems, student code of conduct violations, and academic history is important in developing an intensive supervision and intervention plan for habitual offenders. Information sharing reveals problems with drugs and weapons on school grounds. Inter-Agency provides knowledge of how youths "network" with other students - to their collective detriment and potential criminal conduct - which applies a pre-requisite to effective intervention.

Anyone can rationalize one or two incidents, but it becomes very difficult to write off, excuse or minimize the seriousness of trends in a young person's life when a clear picture of all the incidents, criminal and non-criminal, the juvenile is involved in can be seen in complete chronology. A chronological listing of a serious habitual offender's incidents clearly illustrates repeat cycles and rising levels of seriousness.

As an example, juvenile offender "Huey" shows the advantage to school and law enforcement officials when a complete profile is available. In this case there were two different data sources in the police department, arrest files and the crime analysis unit. Other agencies involved included the school system and the combined social service/probation department.

Their information indicated "Huey" was a victim of abuse, a chronic runaway and prone to violent acts. Only by combining the information from the various agencies was "Huey" given the attention needed to place him under control before he killed himself or others. "Huey's" profile shows:

Description: White male, 15 years old, 6'1" tall, 210 lbs., large and clumsy, unaware of his strength, very violent nature, described as emotionally handicapped, self-contained.

Background: The subject's parents are divorced, and he lives with his 51-year-old alcoholic father, who has legal custody, in a racially mixed, lower

working-class neighborhood. His father, a seldom-employed roofer, has a lengthy arrest record dating back to 1951, mostly for alcohol-related offenses. His last arrest involved a physical confrontation with the subject wherein blows were exchanged. The subject summoned police, which ultimately led to an arrest. The father swore revenge after the incident. Unofficial reports state the subject and his father fight frequently.

The juvenile has been described as a "ticking time bomb" just waiting to explode. Those who know him or have contact with him say he will kill someone someday. He is a combative and violent individual who, thus far, has failed to respond to treatment. The subject currently is awaiting transfer to a secure commitment facility, although it has been difficult to locate one that will accept him.

"Huey" had never been an adjudicated delinquent. He was invisible to the system.

Defining "habitual offender" became an important task in the department's attempt to generate a solution. The idea of chronic recidivism is not new. The research of Dr. Marvin Wolfgang, published more than 12 years ago, tracked two groups of juveniles in Philadelphia in the early 1970s.

Wolfgang's research showed 80 percent of the juveniles arrested by police were one- or two-time offenders who never came into contact with law enforcement again. However, if youths were arrested a third time, there was a high probability they would be arrested a fourth time. If that occurred, they tended to accelerate their criminal careers. The study concluded 6.3 percent of the total population of offending juveniles was responsible for 52 percent of all juvenile crime committed by the entire study group.

These research findings were used in Jacksonville to develop the criteria for identifying those juveniles considered habitual offenders, those individuals toward whom the intervention techniques would be directed. Arrest data