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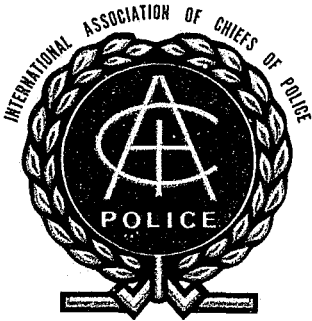
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The Philadelphia Scene Team Experiment

When the Philadelphia Police Department decided to designate two of its detectives solely to the processing of burglary scenes, not only did clearance rates rise, but so did community perceptions of police effectiveness.

By Inspector THOMAS M. SEAMON, Commanding Officer, Career Services Division, Philadelphia Police Department, Pennsylvania

The overwhelming majority of police administrators and the authors of criminal investigation textbooks espouse the axiom that a high clearance rate for residential burglaries could be achieved if, in each case, the scene was processed for latent fingerprints and neighborhood interviews were conducted to locate potential witnesses. The policy of many police departments demands that this investigative effort be expended on every reported burglary.

The fact of the matter is that the command staffs of these departments realize that most burglaries are not investigated this thoroughly. In most large urban police agencies, the workload imposed on investigators precludes the time available to carry out this procedure.

A Rand Corporation study published in 1975 stated that latent print investigations were not initiated in at least 70 percent of reported burglaries.¹ This study and a similar study conducted by the National Institute of Justice in 1984 indicated that criminals leave latent prints at approximately 40 percent of all crime scenes, yet latent prints produce suspects in only about 5 percent of the cases where they are lifted.²

These studies maintain that, where adequate processing capabilities exist, cold searches of latent fingerprints are far more effective in increasing the apprehension rate than are routine follow-up investigations.

Although many police departments have established goals that direct investigators to process burglary scenes and conduct neighborhood interviews, it is well known that these established goals are not often attained, since investigator manpower, caseloads and schedules (priority investigations, court appearances, complainant/witness availability, etc.) greatly impede the investigator's ability to accomplish these tasks.

Like many other departments, the

Philadelphia Police Department has required the thorough processing of burglary scenes in order to provide burglary victims with a highly visible and impressive police service. The compliance and success of this procedure, however, had not been effectively measured. In an effort to determine the usefulness of this procedure, an alternative methodology and monitoring program was implemented in 1987.

The Scene Team

The Northwest Detective Division provides investigative services to four police districts that make up the entire northwestern area of Philadelphia. Included within its 30+ square miles is a population of approximately 375,000 residents. Various neighborhoods encompass white, black, Hispanic and Asian residents. The area includes all economic classes, from the very poor to the city's most affluent. Some of the large middle-class neighborhoods suffer from high burglary rates. Approximately 70 detectives and eight supervisors handled the investigation of over 18,000 reported Part I crimes in the division during 1987.

In January 1987, a "scene team" composed of two detectives was created within the Northwest Detective Division. Its function was to visit the scene of as many burglaries as possible within the highest crime sectors of the Northwest Division.

One detective processed the location for latent prints and any other physical evidence, while the other detective interviewed neighbors in the immediate area. The paperwork responsibilities of the team were kept to a minimum. They were not assigned the burglary case. They processed as many scenes as possible during their tour of duty and reported their findings to the assigned detective, who was responsible for completing the investigation and all necessary reports. If

useful information was gathered from the interviews or latent prints were lifted, the assigned detective was immediately notified for follow-up.

It was decided that the experiment would be conducted for one year, with the team keeping accurate records of its activities. During this year, the team was free to try any innovative methods its members considered useful, with the approval of the commanding officer. At the end of this period, an evaluation of the program would be conducted and a report with the results of the experiment would be submitted to the chief inspector of the Detective Bureau.

Squad supervisors were cautioned that the scene team was not to be used as a replacement for the Mobile Crime Detection Unit (MCDU). That unit was still to be used, as always, in cases such as robberies/shootings and commercial safe burglaries. The team's activities were to be restricted to residential burglaries that the MCDU would not normally handle.

The experiment began in January 1987. Initially, the team alternated 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and 3 p.m. to 11 p.m., weekly. However, it quickly became apparent that the 9-to-5 tour would have to be altered. Middle-class neighborhoods with high burglary rates were deserted during the day. With most adults working and the children in school, the team was unable to locate potential witnesses or gain entrance to crime scenes. Their hours were thus changed to 1 p.m. to 9 p.m., alternating with 3 p.m. to 11 p.m.

If latent prints were lifted from a scene, the assigned detective was notified. The prints, however, could only be submitted to the latent section of the Identification Unit if a suspect for comparison could be suggested whose prints were on file on a tenprint card. To develop a suspect for submission, the assigned detective and the team would use intelligence gathered

from the neighborhood interviews and recommendations by other detectives in the division, based on their knowledge of previous offenders. The divisional summary sheets were culled for likely suspects and, at times, cold searches were made of the offender microfiche files.

First-Year Results

The statistics for the period January 26 to December 21, 1987, were as follows:

Total scenes processed	1052
Latent examination negative	208
No suitable surfaces	269
Scene not examined (complainant would not permit processing, or unable to contact complainant after several attempts)	394
Latent examination positive (prints lifted)	181
Witnesses located by scene team	55
Unfounded (information gathered by team enabled burglary to be classified unfounded)	8
Other evidence collected	11
Physical arrests by team (crimes in progress)	3
Cases solved by link-up of latent print to suspect	10

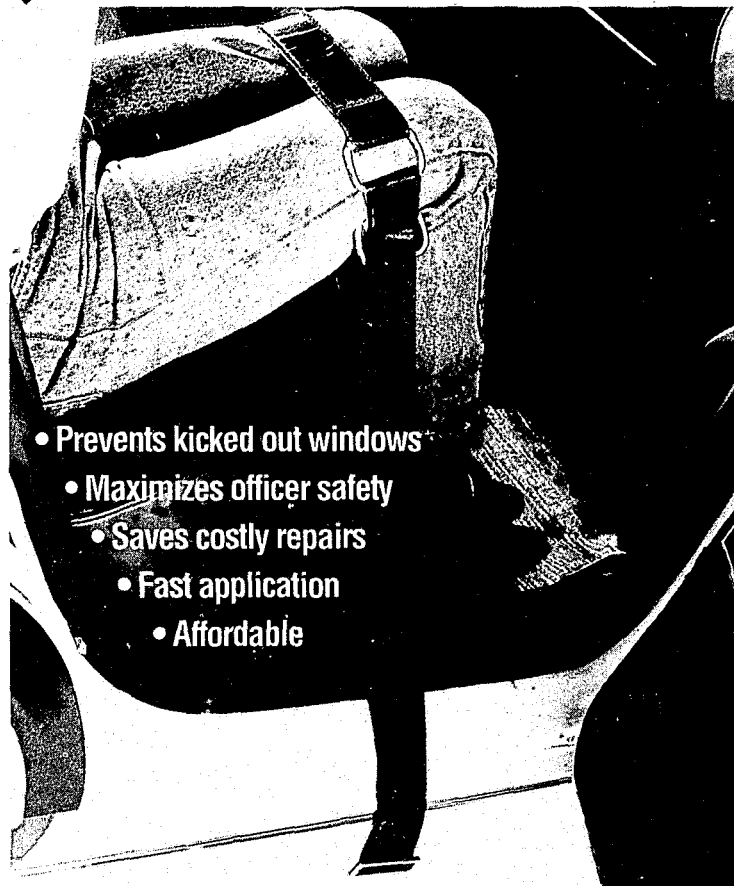
During this same period, the other detectives assigned to the Northwest Detective Division were able to clear only two cases through the identification of latent fingerprint evidence.

An examination of the statistical information indicates that for the period surveyed, the team's efforts were resulting in approximately one arrest per month. Many of the clearances came in the latter half of the period, suggesting that the success rate climbed significantly after the initial start-up phase. Also significant is the fact that of the 10 suspects identified by latents, one was charged with 100 burglaries and another was charged with 30 burglaries.

The team was able to produce identifiable lifts from 17.2 percent of the scenes it visited. The roadblock to more clearances was the fact that the Philadelphia Police Department does not have the capability of making cold searches of its tenprint files. With an Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS), the team's 17.2 percent rate would compare favorably with the success rate for AFIS systems already functioning around the country. Twenty to 25 percent of the latent prints fed into these systems are identified and matched to a suspect.

Approximately 37 percent of the total scenes could not be examined because the complainants either refused processing or would not make themselves available to the team after repeated contacts. This may indicate that many of the complainants had given up on the criminal justice system and had lost faith in the police. In other cases, the complainant

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might have determined that a friend or relative was the culprit.

A similar program was initiated in the Northwest Detective Division in 1988. During the period March 4 through July 8, 1988, a single investigator processed 156 scenes, resulting in a total of 71 lifts. This is a success rate of approximately 45 percent. The Northwest Division is a newer, higher-income section of the city than the Northwest Division, and there are some preliminary indications that age and the cleanliness of scenes processed are factors in the success ratio. However, more research will have to be done on this trend.

The Philadelphia Police Department is undergoing a fundamental change in orientation toward a total philosophy of community policing. More foot patrol beats have been established, neighborhood mini-stations have been opened and a city-wide victim assistance program has been instituted. Although the impact on the public from a community policing standpoint was not originally a factor in the design of the experiment, the scene team concept fits nicely into that philosophy. Indeed, the concept has drawn unanimous praise and enthusiasm from the community. Complainants welcomed the team into their homes and businesses with open arms.

The perception in the community was

that the police department considered each burglary to be a serious matter worthy of the best scientific crime detection effort that the department could muster. Whether or not the investigation ultimately resulted in an arrest did not seem nearly as important to victims as the fact that the police considered *their* problem to be important. The investigative effort displayed by the team seemed to significantly reduce the feelings of victimization experienced by the complainants. The question of whether the community relations value generated by the program is an efficient use of detective manpower can only be answered by the department's views of the program dovetailing with community-oriented policing.

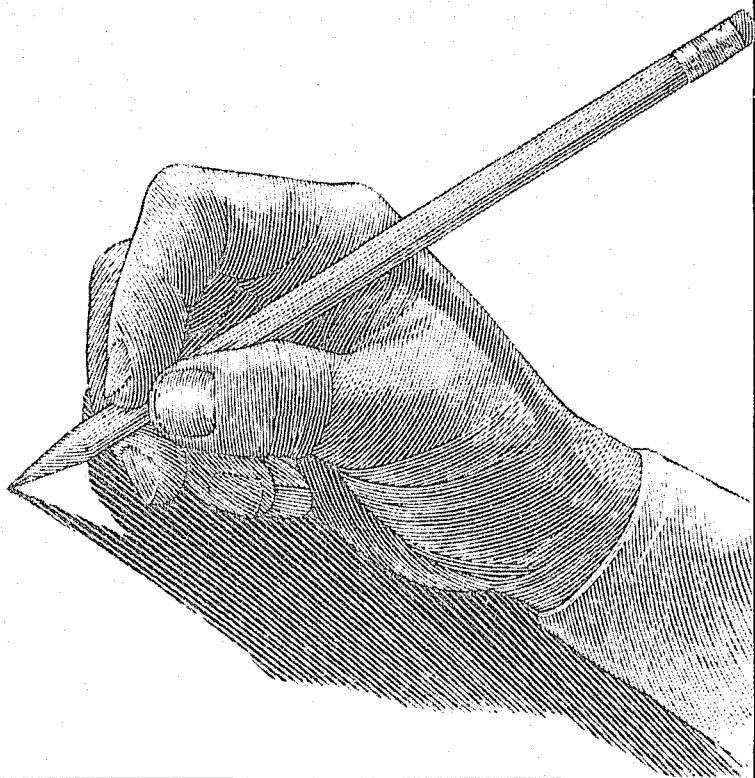
While processing scenes for latent prints met with a measure of success, the same could not be said for canvassing the neighborhood for interviews. While neighborhood interviews are often productive in reference to such crimes as homicides, rapes and robberies, the same cannot be demonstrated for burglaries. The time expended on conducting routine neighborhood interviews at every residential burglary scene is not productive when compared with the resulting information.

In general, if neighbors observe anything that may be useful to the police,

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they will call police to report the burglary or they will notify their neighbor—the complainant—who will direct the investigator to the source of the information. Residents who do not want to get involved will not give any information to detectives who are canvassing the area.

Related Findings

Among the team's observations after the first year are the following:

- A significant number of residences next to vacant properties were burglarized.
- There was almost no success in lifting prints from locations where plasterboard

walls were broken. The resulting dust absorbs the oil in latent impressions left at the scene.

- The success rate in obtaining prints from the outside of windows was very low, apparently due to the grime caused by air pollution in Philadelphia.

Conclusions

The results of the first year of the scene team experiment demonstrate that a significant number of burglary scenes will produce good latent lifts. It is an efficient use of detective manpower, if the missing piece of the equation—an AFIS—is added.

The Philadelphia Police Department is

in the initial stages of procuring an AFIS. This acquisition will significantly change the criminal investigation function within our department, as it has done in every jurisdiction where it has been introduced.

A recent article written by a member of the San Francisco Police Department's AFIS team recommends that the necessary organizational changes should be implemented well in advance of hardware delivery.³ The Philadelphia Police Department's Detective Bureau will be ready. Plans are being made to implement scene teams in every detective division and modify their activities in light of what has been learned after the first year of operation.

In the future, scene team detectives will be sent to process scenes solo rather than as a two-man team. Thus, twice as many scenes can be processed with approximately the same man-hours expended. It will be the detective's option to conduct neighborhood interviews if information received from the complainant or another source at the scene indicates that it is warranted. Scene team members will be supplied with pre-printed cards to be left at locations where there is no response. This should increase the number of positive contacts with the public.

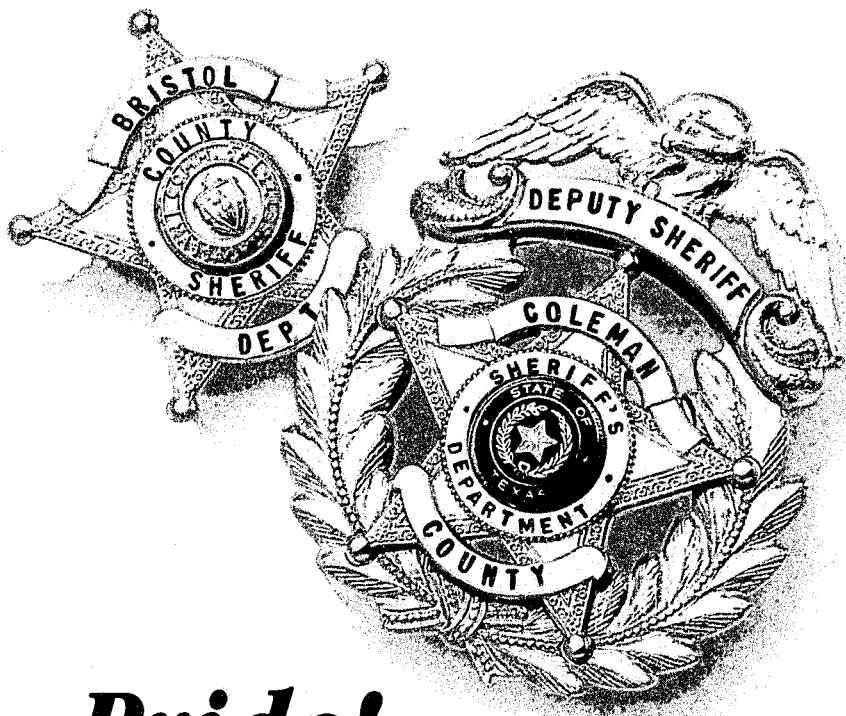
The designation of one or more detectives in a division to process burglary scenes is more efficient than requiring each detective to process his own burglary scene. Special training and repetition develop proficiency in lifting latent prints. Efficiency is also gained by having one individual in a squad car plan his tour of duty in a logical manner to visit as many scenes as possible, rather than having many detectives competing for a limited number of vehicles to process each scene on an individual trip basis.

In summary, the experience in Philadelphia has demonstrated that the standard processing of residential burglary scenes by a large urban police department can be an efficient, beneficial method of operation. It can also make an effective contribution to a total community policing effort by a department. These benefits will only accrue, however, if the department has the ability to make cold searches of its tenprint files. This mandates the implementation of an AFIS system. ★

¹J. Chaiken Greenwood, and J. Petersilia, 1975. "The Criminal Investigative Process," The Rand Corporation, 1975.

²Mihajlovic Peterson, and Gilliland, "Forensic Evidence and The Police: The Effects of Scientific Evidence on Criminal Investigations" (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 1984).

³Kenneth Moses, "The Promise Fulfilled: Making Local AFIS Systems Work." *The Police Chief*, October 1987, p. 52.



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