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# Taking a Problem-Oriented Approach to Crime and Drug Enforcement

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## Introduction

**T**he crack cocaine epidemic that emerged in the mid-1980s created an organizational challenge that is testing the resources and ingenuity of American law enforcement agencies. This dilemma has demanded new skills, long-range strategies and coordinated responses of police to make the best use of scarce human and financial resources. Many policing agencies responded to the dilemma by putting more officers on the streets, severely straining urban budgets where drug problems were particularly severe.

Yet the drug problems of the '80s proved remarkably enduring and resilient to the efforts of traditional law enforcement. The enduring nature of the drug problem has caused increasing numbers of law enforcement personnel to question the efficacy of their drug fighting methods. Legitimate and important questions have been raised about the wisdom of relying on a criminal

justice system — the judiciary, prisons, probation/parole and law enforcement — which is overloaded with drug business.

Indeed, some criminal justice experts have suggested that pumping more offenders into the clogged criminal justice system will not reduce enduring drug problems. Instead of criminal justice and law enforcement strategies, these experts advocate other methods that should be explored, including developing a thorough understanding of drug problems and enlisting the support of other public and private groups.

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Tampa police officers conduct community surveys in a public housing complex to gain input from residents about neighborhood problems.

A substantial amount of research has already been done on improving the efficiency of American police. The most promising research points to the use of a problem-oriented approach to policing, an analytical strategy that can be used by line officers.

For tackling drug problems, the problem-oriented approach is an idea whose time has come. This proactive policing strategy evolved from more than two decades of research which has clearly shown that adding more

cops and making more arrests does not solve problems — especially durable and complex problems. Instead, a problem-oriented approach involves narrowly identifying problems and systematically analyzing information about these problems. Only after thorough analysis of individual problems can effective responses be developed. And those responses should include an active role for other agencies and groups which have a stake in solving a particular problem.


Thus an officer who faces the

problem of a drug hot spot in a particular location must identify what conditions contribute to that problem. If truant youths are the culprits, and poor lighting and a litter- strewn environment constitute the background for the activity, and nearby abandoned dwellings provide a cache for drugs, then all of those contributing factors are part of the problem. A problem-solving officer, for example, would not disregard the lighting issue, claiming it was not a police problem. If a condition contributes, directly or indirectly, to a drug problem, as might poor lighting at a drug spot, then it is clearly a condition for which the police should take the lead to develop a solution.

The officer does not do all the work alone. For example, the officer might try to determine why truant youths are out of school and develop a coordinated response in concert with local schools. Or the officer might tap alternative resources such as recreational services to divert the

youths. The officer might try to enlist assistance from the city's codes and compliance agency to have abandoned buildings boarded up, or contact absentee owners to inform them of the conditions and urge them to correct the problem. And, importantly, the officer may also arrest dealers or buyers as part of this problem-solving effort. Thus a problem-oriented approach might include a number of these strategies; the choice of the strategy is based upon information the officer gained from carefully analyzing the *specific* problem before developing a response.

However, if an officer decides to *only* make arrests instead of improving the lighting and other conditions, it's likely that the officer will have to return to the site again and again and continue making arrests. Conversely, getting the lighting improved, diverting youths and getting grounds cleaned up may make it inconvenient for drug dealers to do their business on that corner.



It is important to note that the responses of problem-solving officers are not generic: drug problems must be evaluated on an individual basis because what works in one situation will not necessarily work in another. Thus, the important components of problem-oriented policing are both analyzing the problem to determine its causes, and mustering the assistance to resolve it.

Problem-oriented policing has been successfully applied, albeit on a limited basis. The first field studies were conducted in Newport News, VA, beginning in 1984 on a variety of drug and non-drug problems. Three additional police agencies in Florida (Clearwater, Tampa and St. Petersburg) tested the strategy beginning in 1987. Baltimore County, Md., and New York City police agencies have also used problem-solving strategies. Although experience is limited, each of the sites has encountered remarkable success in using the strategy to identify and solve

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problems in their communities.

The notion of problem-oriented policing was first described in 1979 by Prof. Herman Goldstein of the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Goldstein said that the role of police is to handle persistent problems that trouble citizens. He theorized that officers could be more successful if they would group incidents together to identify problems, rather than only responding to incidents after the

fact. By grouping incidents together, officers could analyze the underlying conditions that contribute to the problem, and develop and implement a long-term solution. Thus, a series of calls to a certain location for drug dealing would not be viewed as isolated events, but as a problem for which a long-term strategy should be developed.

### **Project Description**

Encouraged by the successful application of problem-oriented policing strategies, in 1987 the Bureau of Justice Assistance and the Police Executive Research Forum entered into an agreement to conduct a two-year project applying a problem-oriented approach to the problems of illegal drugs. The objectives of the project are four-fold:

- to increase the effectiveness of police in battling local drug problems by addressing the underlying community problems

that give rise to them;

- to increase the reliance on the knowledge and creative approaches of line officers to analyze problems and develop solutions;
- to encourage police to tap diverse public and private resources in a cooperative effort to solve community problems; and,
- to develop a closer involvement with the public to see that police address the needs of citizens.

In the spring of 1988, five cities were selected to participate in the project — Atlanta, Tampa, Philadelphia, Tulsa and San Diego. Each of these project sites has targeted a portion of its city that faces severe problems with drug dealing and crime. Street level sales of crack cocaine, and the violence associated with dealing, clearly dominates police concerns in each city. Four of the project



cities have also focused predominantly upon areas which include large public housing complexes. Those cities are developing project strategies that include an active role for both residents and management of the housing authorities. All of the cities are developing a cooperative interagency response to maximize the role of both public and private resources.

To launch their problem-solving efforts, each of the cities in the Problem-Oriented Approach to Drug Enforcement project formed a management committee to conduct an inventory of their target area's drug problems. This inventory is a comprehensive collection of information about drug problems in the city and target area. The intent was to develop a thorough understanding of the elements of drug problems in specific areas. Project participants integrated existing data (from medical examiners, drug treatment facilities, hospitals, schools and

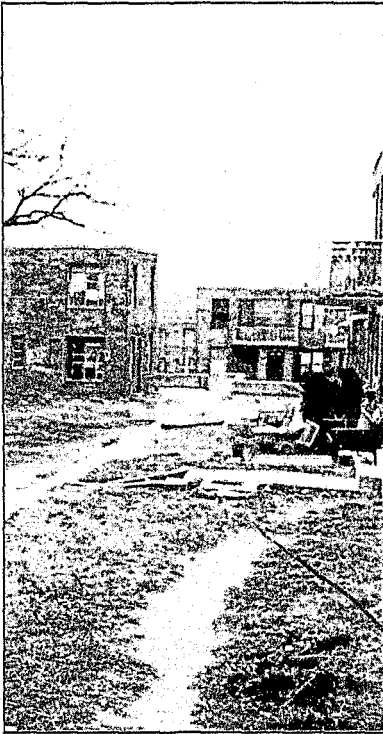
other agencies) with information obtained through primary data sources such as community surveys, environmental surveys, and jail debriefing forms. The subsequent picture developed of an area's drug problem has assisted police with developing tailored responses rather than applying generic drug enforcement strategies.

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The management committees or task groups are also guiding



Abandoned apartments in public housing, such as these in Atlanta, can provide havens for drug sales and use, and a cache for hiding drugs.

the organizational application of the problem-oriented policing techniques. Task groups assist officers in identifying problems, exploring alternative strategies, reviewing progress being made in the field, and providing access to

resources. In each city, a Field Technical Assistance Coordinator employed by the Forum provides technical assistance to the task group and to officers who are using problem-solving techniques. This technical assistance comes in the form of training sessions, assistance in developing data collection instruments, guidance in identifying and developing relationships with public and private sector organizations, providing information about strategies being used in other sites, and facilitating communication within the police organization.

The Problem-Oriented Approach to Drug Enforcement project includes three cluster conferences as a means to share problem-solving strategies among project participants. The group meetings, which have drawn other organizations such as local and federal housing officials into the problem-oriented policing project, have served to enhance each city's application of problem-solving techniques by

increasing interaction among project participants and facilitating the exchange of information.

## San Diego

San Diego, a city with a population of 1.1 million, faces major problems with the sale and use of illegal narcotics. A mobile, heterogeneous population, proximity to international borders and other demographic and geographical factors contribute to the extent of drug problems in this city. Many of the city's open air drug dealing locations are located in the predominantly residential Southeastern area of the city.

One successful program in the department has been the deployment of the WECAN unit — the Walking Enforcement Campaign Against Narcotics. This is a mobile squad of uniformed foot patrol officers who tackle street level crime through “high visibility and aggressive enforcement” in selected target areas. Once a problem is stabilized,

the WECAN unit moves on to another target area in the city.

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## **Residents feel they have very little control over the activities that occur in the neighborhood.**

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The officers of the WECAN unit were a natural group to launch the Problem-Oriented Approach to Drug Enforcement project in San Diego. This group of officers was receptive to learning new skills that would enable them to focus more resources on solving neighborhood problems. Equally receptive were patrol officers from the Southeastern Division who were also trained in the principles of problem-oriented policing. Southeastern Patrol, with assistance from WECAN and other department units, was selected by the project management team to apply problem-solving strategies and

to monitor the impact of those strategies in a target neighborhood.

The target neighborhood is a 12-square block area of approximately 1,300 residents. The violent crime rate in this area is five times the average crime rate for the city and the property crime rate is 1.5 times the city's average.

Following identification of the target area, officers, in tandem with the project's management team and technical assistance, developed and coordinated administration of a survey to gauge the depth of drug and crime problems in this area. Officers were not surprised to learn that area residents are extremely fearful. Most insightful was the information that residents feel they have very little control over the activities that occur in the neighborhood. Police felt that they could develop a plan of action that would specifically address this problem: restore a "sense of control" to residents as



The proactive nature of problem-oriented policing doesn't obviate the need for strict law enforcement on occasion, as in this arrest in Tulsa.

a means to reduce high levels of fear. Since church affiliation of residents was their strongest organizational link, police planned to use churches as an instrument to organize the community and restore a sense of control.

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## **Police planned to use churches as an instrument to organize the community and restore a sense of control.**

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Officers have also collected information and developed relationships with other organizations which have a stake or can play a key role in mitigating problems. One officer, for example, identified a specific residence as a constant drug hot spot. Using a variety of information sources, including ownership records, he determined the identity of the owner and that the occupant was a renter under a federally subsidized housing program. The officer enlisted the assistance of the owner, the local Housing Commission and the regional office of the U.S. Department of Housing and

Urban Development. All were important elements in resolving what had been a constant police problem. The problem resolution also set the stage for a policy change that may prevent similar problems and save valuable police time.

### **Atlanta**

Police Zone 1 of Atlanta is an area adjacent to the city's downtown business district. It is an area of low income residents and small businesses. A number of large public housing complexes are located in a target area of this zone. These complexes have a high incidence of drug activity. And the areas are also home to a high incidence of aggravated assaults, burglaries, robberies, and homicides which have been linked with drug dealing.

These are the neighborhoods where the Atlanta Bureau of Police Services believes officers can make an impact on drugs and crime. The project team is joint-



ly using patrol officers and narcotics investigators to tackle problems in two target complexes. In league with the Housing Authority, police are developing specialized strategies to stabilize crime problems within the communities.

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An important dimension of the problem-solving effort in Atlanta is the plan to build an extensive interagency effort to tackle drug problems. One important liaison is the relationship of police with the Housing Authority which manages all of the city's public housing units.

Recognizing the importance of the participation of housing officials in developing responses to problems, the bureau has a detective assigned full time to the Housing Authority as a liaison.

Project participants have also made progress in integrating resources and obtaining information from a wide variety of social service, health care organizations, and criminal justice groups including probation and parole, juvenile justice, and courts. Assistance in the analysis of problems has been obtained from federal agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institute of Justice's Drug Use Forecasting efforts. State agencies, such as the Department of Human Resources, and local government organizations, such as schools and courts, have also contributed.

Project assistance, however, is not limited to the public sector. The private sector is also contributing to efforts to improve the

quality of life and reduce problems in the target areas. For example, one large local corporation is consulting with police about investing renovation funds in one public housing area.

By the time of the project's completion, Atlanta will have developed a comprehensive resource guide to assist police with bringing many resources to bear on problems.

### **Tulsa**

To implement the Problem-Oriented Approach to Drug Enforcement project in Tulsa, OK, a management team facilitated the assignment of nine foot patrol officers to a target area of five public housing complexes. These complexes were considered areas where drug dealing was particularly visible and where tenants were being blatantly victimized by drug dealers. The intimidation by dealers had resulted in a lack of communication between tenants and police, had created high

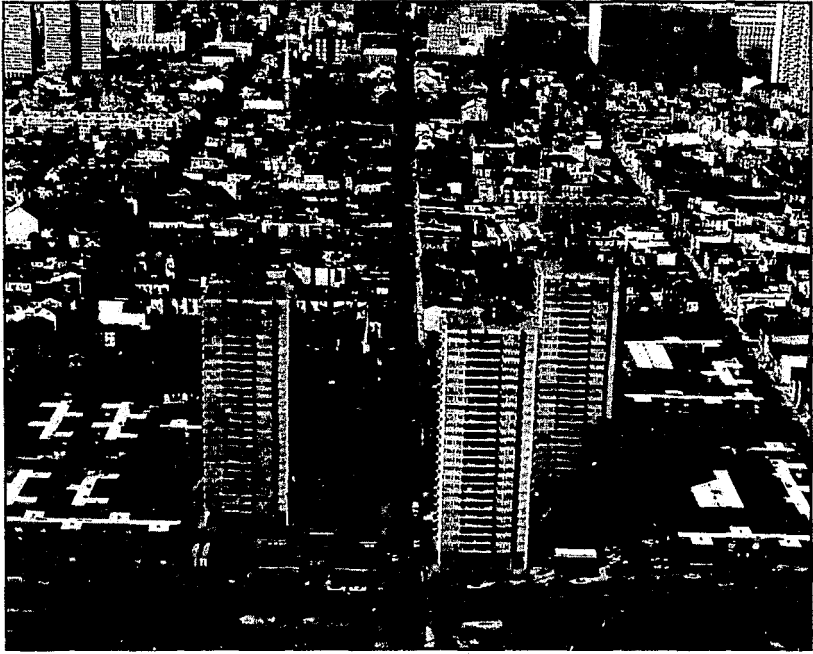
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**The intimidation by dealers resulted in a lack of communication between tenants and police, and created high levels of fear in the community.**

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levels of fear in the community, and had hampered the ability of police to be knowledgeable and respond to problems.

Following assignment to this project, officers began to develop programs to help the residents. Many of the programs were social events, such as outings and athletic activities. Other programs were designed to help tenants improve their self-image and assist with finding a job. Concomitant with this program development was an aggressive



High rise public housing complexes, such as these towers in South Philadelphia, pose special problems for police in cities.

enforcement effort. The goal is to rid the areas of drug dealers so that a team of residents, police and housing officials can reclaim and maintain control of the troubled neighborhoods.

The efforts of police, however, were not only social and enforcement oriented. Officers devoted

time to evaluating quality of life problems such as deteriorated buildings, lack of adequate lighting, and prevalence of trash-ridden areas. These problems were viewed as closely linked with drug problems. The efforts of these officers caught the attention of the city's mayor who, along with a group of advisors,



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has endorsed the goal of empowering the residents.


The group has been so successful that the department is now training all officers in the problem-oriented policing strategy, through in-service training and the police academy. The department is also developing policies and procedures to fully incorporate the problem-oriented approach into the department's day-to-day opera-

tions. Sensitive to the notion of displacement of drug dealing and related crime, Tulsa is moving quickly to have all police in the city engaged in the results-oriented problem-solving strategy.

### **Tampa**

Tampa is one of the largest growth areas in the country. Police in this South Florida city are using the problem-oriented approach to tackle drug and drug-linked problems in College Hill Homes, a 710-unit public housing complex. The neighborhood, which was the scene of a civil disturbance in 1986, is adjacent to another public housing complex of similar size. In 1988, 6 percent of the department's patrol force was assigned to the College Hill area, yet the complex represents just 0.9 percent of the city's population.

Drug dealing and related crime is the major problem in College Hill, but officers, upon analyzing the problems, dis-



covered that most of the illegal activity is conducted by non-residents. Recognizing the role of "outsiders" in College Hill led project participants to seek ways to beef up enforcement of trespassing laws. Tampa police are using their authority as designated agents of the housing agency to strictly enforce trespassing laws; violators are targeted and frequently arrested.

But arrests aren't the only tool the Tampa police use to control

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ingress and egress. Pursuant to a survey of residents which pointed to the role of outsiders Tampa police initiated a parking control program. A key feature of the program was painting the parking lots and assigning designated parking spaces to residents. Each vehicle was to be given a decal so that police can identify non-resident vehicles. Visitor parking is limited and controlled.

Tampa police have also developed a form to improve communication between themselves and local housing officials about non-residents. A Housing Violation Form was developed for police to report lease violations which come to their attention. In particular, police report the apparent residence by individuals other than those who are named on the lease. Occupation of the unit by people not specified is a clear violation of the housing agency's lease agreement with its tenants. This housing violation form may aid police in separating legitimate and law abiding residents from other in-

dividuals who frequent the community. It may also help limit unwarranted intrusion upon residents by non-residents. A similar form developed by police will be used to communicate criminal violations to the housing agency. Once those violations are reported, the housing agency can take appropriate action against troublemakers in the community.

Police anticipate that these practices will aid them in returning control of the complex to the residents.

### **Philadelphia**

Three 25-story public housing complexes cast a shadow over the business district known as Queen Village in South Philadelphia. The towers, surrounded by garden style public housing, pose a major problem for police. Fear of crime has resulted in increasing isolation for many of the residents here and the deteriorated physical environment has heightened fear. The proximity


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**The (environmental survey) information provides an information bank to help officers determine exactly where drug dealing is most likely to occur.**

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to the adjacent business and residential areas has complicated the problems.

To restore stability to the area, police are developing neighborhood-based Drug Free Zones to provide an area of sanctuary for residents. Drug Free Zones are modeled after the zones around schools where stiffer penalties await arrested drug peddlers and enforcement activities can be concentrated. Neighborhood Drug Free Zones, however, are dependent upon the active invol-




vement of area residents and businesses who make a commitment to assist police in keeping areas stable. Because police resources are limited, the idea is to stabilize the area and put it into the hands of neighbors who can maintain the environment. Key elements of the plan include an environmental cleanup and training citizens in intelligence gathering. But getting the community involved in the activity is a requisite for success.

Police are also implementing other strategies to loosen the foothold drug dealers have in this area. One police officer has undertaken an effort to identify abandoned buildings in the area that are havens for drug dealing. Following identification, efforts are made to find the owner and/or have the buildings condemned by the city's codes and compliance department. Another officer, having identified the lack of narcotic treatment programs available to residents in public housing, has worked to begin a Narcotics

Anonymous program in the neighborhood.

The Philadelphia team is also making use of a unique data collection instrument known as an environmental survey. This instrument allows police to collect descriptive physical information about drug hot spots. The information provides an information bank to help officers determine exactly where drug dealing is most likely to occur. The survey also provides clues for intervention in drug dealing, and helps police assess what physical cues contribute most to fear in the community. Used in tandem with community surveys of residents, these environmental surveys promise good information for police in developing strategies that are specific to an affected area.



**I**t is too early to predict with any certainty the long-term effects of using a problem-oriented approach to battle complex drug problems in our nation's cities.

What can be accurately reported at this time is that police in the project's cities are showing admirable enthusiasm and creativity in tackling these problems. By combining innovative, interagency tactics with traditional law enforcement approaches, police feel as if they are making a bigger impact on durable problems. Another important result is that the officers using problem-solving techniques have an enhanced level of job satisfaction. By attacking problems that are linked with drug and crime problems — although the problems themselves may not be strictly law enforcement problems — police in this project are recognizing that their efforts can have a lasting impact

on the quality of people's lives.

Some of these problem-solving efforts will work better than others. And even successful problem-solving efforts may work only on specific problems. Of greatest importance is the development of a thought process for police that fosters both creative and collaborative solutions to specific problems. This development stands in stark contrast to the application of global measures for all drug problems. For this reason, a problem-oriented approach has a good chance for making a long-term impact on neighborhood drug problems.

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