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On Good Authority is a periodic briefing on trends and issues in criminal justice. This report was written by staff Research Analyst Tracy Hahn. It is a summary of a program evaluation conducted by the University of Illinois at Springfield. Copies of the evaluation are available from the Authority's Research and Analysis Unit.

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Homicide task force helps solve tough cases in St. Clair and Madison counties

A special task force created in 1992 to solve homicides and other violent crimes in the East St. Louis area has taken dozens of serious offenders off the streets and may have contributed to a significant drop in the homicide rate, according to a recent evaluation of the program.

Of the 56 defendants prosecuted by the Homicide and Violent Crime Strike Force during its first four years of operation, 33 of the cases went to trial and 23 were disposed of through guilty pleas. Of the 33 cases that went to trial, 30 resulted in convictions and three resulted in mistrials due to "hung juries."

In all, the task force opened 72 cases in Madison and St. Clair counties during its first four years. Fifty-seven of those cases involved murder.

This report is a summary of an evaluation of the Homicide and Violent Crime Strike Force program in Madison and St. Clair counties conducted by the University of Illinois at Springfield. The evaluation covered the operations of the task force while it was receiving federal funding under the Anti-Drug Abuse Act (ADAA) from 1992 to 1996.

Background

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Madison and St. Clair counties experienced high levels of violent crime, particularly homicides (Figure 1). This problem was most noticeable in East St. Louis in St. Clair County, which was experiencing a

large number of homicides and relatively low clearance rates. The 62 homicides reported in East St. Louis in 1991 equated to a rate of 151 homicides for every 100,000 residents, compared to a state-wide rate of 11.4 homicides per 100,000 residents.

In response to this problem, the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, through a federal ADAA grant, supported the development of the Homicide and Violent Crime Strike Force.

About the evaluation

The objectives of the evaluation were to document and examine: 1) the original goals and objectives of the task force, its initial operating procedures, practices, organizational structure, and resource allocation, as well as its internal and external relationships; 2) changes in the structure, procedures, practices, resources, and relationships that occurred over time; and 3) the impact of the task force on cases, law enforcement, prosecutors, the judicial system, and the communities in which it operated.

To accomplish these objectives, the research team examined task force program documents and correspondence with the Authority, interviewed task force supervisors and staff, and examined data from task force case files. The research team also interviewed area law enforcement personnel, prosecutors,



Fifty-seven of the 72 cases opened by the task force during the course of the grant involved murder. More than 90 percent of the cases involved a weapon, usually a handgun.

judges, defense attorneys and community leaders.

Task force design

The task force was designed as a joint venture between the Illinois State Police (ISP) and the Illinois Attorney General's Office. ISP provided one supervisor and four case agents. The goal was to select experienced homicide investigators who also had significant ties to the communities in which the task force operated. Another goal of the ISP component was to obtain the support and involvement of local law enforcement officers, especially officers from the East St. Louis Police Department.

The attorney general's component included two attorneys, one investigator, and one secretary who supported both the ISP and the attorney general's components. The attorney general's component was designed to assist local prosecutors in the prosecution of task force cases and provide legal advice to ISP agents. It was also anticipated that the task force attorneys would occasionally take a lead role in the prosecution of task force cases.

Operation of the task force

The attorney general's investigator was the primary source for the selection of cases for the task force. The investigator reviewed unsolved homicide and violent crime cases, and then selected cases to be moved directly to the ISP squad leader.

The perceived solvability of a case was central to the task force's decision on whether to accept the case. One factor of solvability identified as very important by the members of the task force was the availability of witnesses. In more

than 70 percent of task force cases there was at least one identified witness to the crime.

As the task force evolved, cases were also referred to it by local law enforcement agencies. The average time from the date of the crime to the request from a local agency for task force assistance on a case was 1.4 years. However, the time for such requests varied greatly. Some requests came the day of the crime, and one came more than 34 years after the crime.

The authority to terminate investigation of task force cases, prior to presentation of the case to the local prosecutor, rested with the squad leader. If all leads were deemed exhausted, non-homicide cases were closed and homicide cases

were placed on an inactive status pending reactivation should new leads develop. The case agent and squad leader maintained authority to request prosecution of a case, but the final decision to proceed with prosecution resided with the county state's attorney.

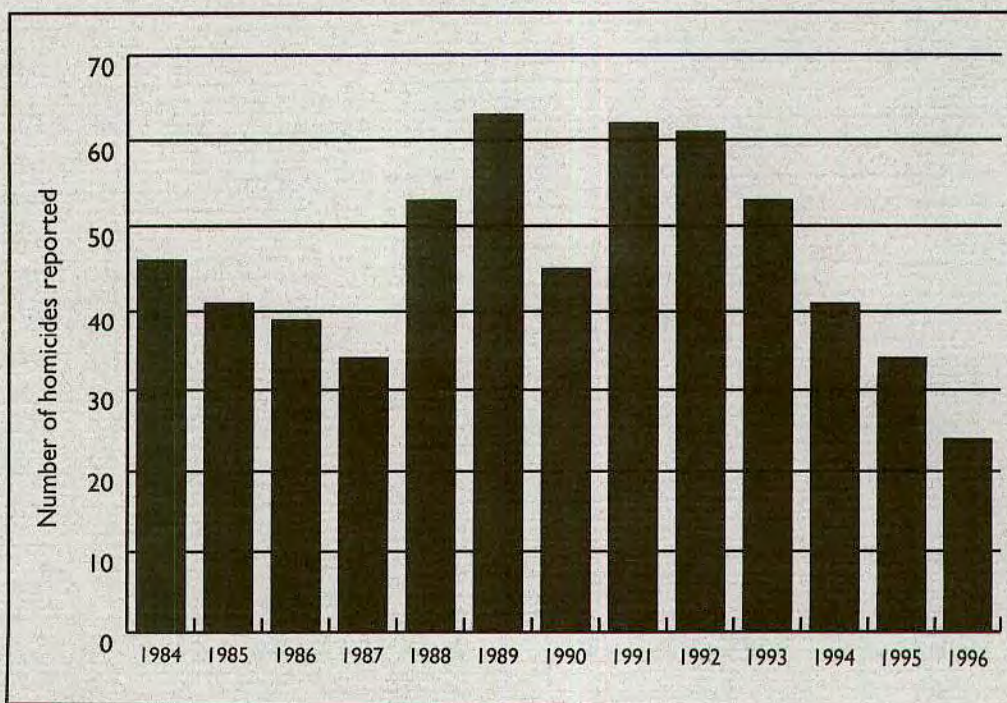
Impact on cases

The task force opened 72 cases during the course of the grant. Fifty-seven of the cases involved murder, 10 involved assault or battery, three involved sexual assault, and two involved robbery or armed robbery. More than 90 percent of the cases involved a weapon, usually a handgun.

The task force experienced great success in obtaining arrests and convictions. This was seen most strongly in St. Clair County, where more than 90 percent of the task force cases originated (East St. Louis alone accounted for 68 percent of task force cases).

The 72 task force cases involved charges or potential charges against 105 suspects, and 80 of those suspects were arrested (77.8 percent). Court cases proceeded against 72 of the 80 defendants (80 percent). At the time data

Figure 1
Homicides reported in East St. Louis, 1984-1996



collection for the evaluation ceased, the cases against 56 defendants had reached the stage at which a trial was concluded or the court accepted a plea bargain (Figure 2).

Impact on law enforcement, prosecutors, and the judicial system

The task force has assisted local law enforcement by removing 72 serious cases from their caseloads. This has freed local law enforcement to devote more of its limited resources to its current cases, particularly in East St. Louis, where the police department was understaffed.

During the time of task force operations, the homicide rate in East St. Louis declined. One explanation for the decline was the task force's role in identifying and subsequently incarcerating several persons who had committed more than one homicide. Thirty suspects had killed two or more people, and six suspects appear in more than one task force case, indicating a pattern of homicidal conduct. It is not illogical to infer that, if not stopped, these same people would continue to commit violent crimes.

The task force also may have fostered an environment of positive competition. Local law enforcement officers may have more aggressively pursued cases to demonstrate their ability to solve these crimes.

There is general agreement that the work of the task force has enhanced the ability of the local prosecutors to gain convictions in homicides and serious crime. Local prosecutors have been assisted by the task force through additional experienced personnel to aid in homicide and other violent crime prosecutions. This has increased the region's capacity to deal with homicide and violent crime, and the success these offices have experienced in prosecuting task force cases has made them more willing to pursue other old cases developed by the task force.

Impact on the community

East St. Louis, which was the primary focus of the task force, experienced a

significant drop in its homicide rate during the period of task force operations. In both Madison and St. Clair counties violent crime indicators were down for this same period. Attributing a precise impact on these rates to the task force is not possible. However, all participants and members of the community surveyed by the evaluators were convinced that the task force, along with other anticrime initiatives and the improved economic picture in East St. Louis, had contributed to the decline in crime. Most of those interviewed in the community rated the value of the task force as very important and necessary. The consensus was that many old cases

Figure 2

Court cases producing plea bargains or leading to trial

	Cases	Percent
Disposition		
Plea bargain entered	23	41.1%
Trial	33	58.9%
Total	56	100%
Type of plea bargain		
Defendant pled to original charge	12	52.2%
Defendant pled to reduced charge	11	47.8%
Total	23	100%
Result of trial		
Mistrial	3	10%
Conviction	30	90%
Total	33	100%

would have remained untouched without the initiative of the task force.

Conclusions and recommendations

That the task force had a significant impact on the homicide and violent crime rates in Madison and St. Clair Counties can be inferred from the number of successful prosecutions to which the task force contributed, the number of offenders with multiple victims the task force prosecutions removed from the community, and the benefit the task force resources provided to local law enforcement and prosecutors operating with scarce resources.

Interview data suggested several elements were key to task force success:

- Experienced homicide investigators were available for the task force and the investigators had the added advantage of being familiar with the communities in which they operated;

- The task force mission provided the investigators with the resources needed to travel to conduct interviews and collect evidence. The ability to concentrate on a case without having to be diverted to more recent crimes allowed a level of concentration and specialization usually not possible in police departments;

- Identification of a pool of potentially solvable cases was facilitated by the hiring of an attorney general's investigator who had been a homicide investigator in East St. Louis law enforcement long enough to have stored in his memory a list of cases that he believed would have been solved had sufficient resources been available; and,

- Early successes gave the task force a reputation for reliability that led to more cases being referred to them and provided credibility with prosecutors and judges.

While the task force experienced many successes, initially it was frustrated in two areas: First, it failed to gain significant participation from local law enforcement; and second, the attorney general's office was underutilized.

Participation from local law enforcement was limited due to the fact that most police departments could not afford to assign an officer to task force duties. If similar initiatives are undertaken in the future, and if local participation is regarded as important, provisions should be made for the payment of salaries for assigned officers.

While this under-representation of local law enforcement appears to be a mostly financial issue, the reduced utilization of the attorney general's attorneys by local prosecutors, and by the ISP component of the task force, appears more complex and subject to various interpretations.

The original task force design contemplated a very active role for the attorney general's attorneys in supporting local prosecutions. While the role of the attorney general component was realized in Madison County, the bulk of task force cases occurred in St. Clair

County, and during the course of the grant, only two St. Clair County cases involved the attorney general's attorney as the lead prosecutor. Although the St. Clair County's state's attorney acknowledged familiarity and respect for the attorney general's prosecutor, he expressed faith in his staff's ability to handle the cases, and that the eight prosecutors in his office were sufficient to handle his office's cases.

For future initiatives similar to the task force, two recommendations are offered that might aid in the formation and utilization of the attorney general component:

- Prior to initiation of the project, it should be clearly established that the local prosecutor and any entity offering assistance to the prosecutor must agree on the parameters of and conditions for assistance; and

- The model of outside assistance to local prosecutors may be of more value in counties with staff too small to handle current caseloads, or where specialized expertise is not available in the local office and can be provided by the outside entity. ♦

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