



On Good Authority

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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 Supervisor Tracy Hahn. It is based on program evaluations of the East St. Louis Anti-Drug Initiative and the Homicide and Violent Crime Strike Force in Madison and St. Clair Counties. Copies of the evaluations are available from the Authority's Research and Analysis Unit.

The **Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority** is a state agency dedicated to improving the administration of criminal justice in Illinois. The basic functions of the Authority are criminal justice research, federal and state grants administration, and information systems development and support.

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Combating the high murder rate in East St. Louis: a look at two programs

High violent crime rates — particularly for homicide — have plagued East St. Louis for many years. Located in St. Clair County in southwestern Illinois, East St. Louis has a population of 37,438, making it the second most populous city in the county. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the number of homicides in East St. Louis reached record levels, resulting in homicide rates that exceeded that of any other Illinois city, and of many other U.S. cities with notoriously high homicide rates. One of the factors that was identified as contributing directly to this surge in violent crime was an increase in the level of illicit drug activity, especially that associated with crack cocaine.

The violent crime and drug activity were clearly related, and these factors contributed to a decrease in the quality of life and safety for East St. Louis residents. In response to these problems, several state and local agencies worked together to implement a number of programs through neighborhood organizations, criminal justice agencies, treatment providers and social services organizations. Recently available data and formal program evaluations have pointed to some improvement in the situation. While it is difficult to say whether the programming efforts are directly responsible for the recent decrease in homicides in East St. Louis, the following information provides some compelling examples of how the programs have affected the community.

Trends in East St. Louis homicides

Between 1980 and 1987, the number of homicides in East St. Louis hovered around 40 per year (Figure 1). Between 1988 and 1993, however, homicides in the city increased dramatically — reaching an all-time high of 63 in 1989. One of the factors that can be traced back to the period when homicides increased dramatically — between 1987 and 1989 — was the emergence of crack cocaine in the community. In response, programs to address the increase in homicides and drug-related problems were implemented in 1990 and 1992. Since 1991, the number of homicides in East St. Louis decreased every year. The 24 homicides reported in 1996 were the fewest since 1980, and represented a 62 percent decrease in homicides since 1989. Despite this dramatic decrease, however, a comparison to other Illinois cities reveals that East St. Louis's homicide rate (64 per 100,000 population) continues to be higher than that of the ten most populous cities in the state, including Chicago (28 per 100,000). However, seven of the 10 cities experienced increases in their homicide rates between 1989 and 1996.

Comparing the homicide rates and trends in East St. Louis to those in other U.S. cities with traditionally high homicide rates underscores the dramatic decrease experienced in East St. Louis, but also the fact that the 1996 rate is relatively close to these other cities. For example, despite falling more than 50 percent between 1989 and 1996, East St.

Louis' 1996 homicide rate is similar to that experienced in Washington, D.C., and is higher than Detroit and Miami (Figure 2). Thus, while there has been significant improvement, relative to other cities in Illinois and across the country, the East St. Louis homicide rate remains high.

The relationship between homicides and drug-related crime

Total drug arrests in St. Clair County remained relatively stable between 1975 and 1989, before increasing almost every year since. Prior to 1991, arrests in St. Clair County for violations of the Illinois Cannabis Control Act consistently outnumbered arrests for violations of the

Controlled Substances Act. However, arrests for controlled substances have surpassed arrests for cannabis in 1991, 1993, and 1996.

The quantity of crack cocaine seized in St. Clair County increased significantly between 1991 and 1995, while the homicide rate decreased dramatically during this time. In particular, the years 1994 and 1995 saw the highest crack seizures as well as large decreases in the county's homicide rate. Part of the decrease in the homicide rate may be due to the maturation of the crack market as dealers settled into areas and established territory; as opposed to the emergence of drug markets, where conflict often arises over drug market territory.

Overall drug arrests in St. Clair County show a similar trend. As the rate of arrests for drug violations increases, the homicide rate decreases (Figure 3).

Another measure of drug use in St. Clair County is the Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) Program, which tests arrestees for drug use at the time of their arrest. In St. Clair County, 32 percent of the participating arrestees tested positive for cocaine during the 1990/1991 testing period. During the 1995 study, 23 percent of arrestees tested positive for cocaine. Although the percentage of arrestees testing positive for cocaine decreased during this time, the percentage testing positive for marijuana increased from 11 percent to 42 percent.

The criminal justice system's response

In an effort to address the problems facing East St. Louis, the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, along with the Illinois State Police, the Illinois Department of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, and the Illinois Attorney General's Office, funded a series of programs in the East St. Louis area. One of these programs, the East St. Louis Anti-Drug Initiative, began in November 1990 in response to citizen concern over the long-standing and growing drug and violent crime problem in the city. The goals of the project included the restoration of community faith in law enforcement as well as the criminal justice system's ability to deal with the drug problem in

Figure 1

Homicides reported in East St. Louis, 1980-1996

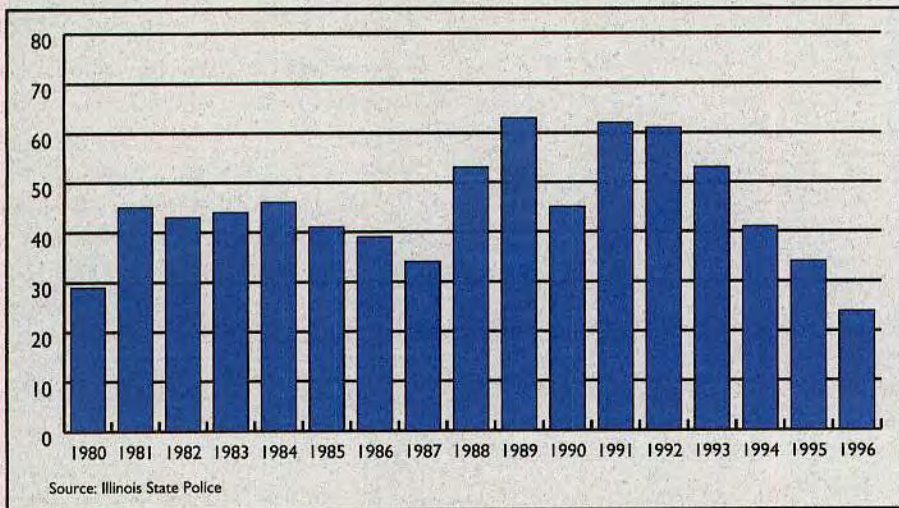


Figure 2

Homicides per 100,000 population, East St. Louis and selected U.S. cities

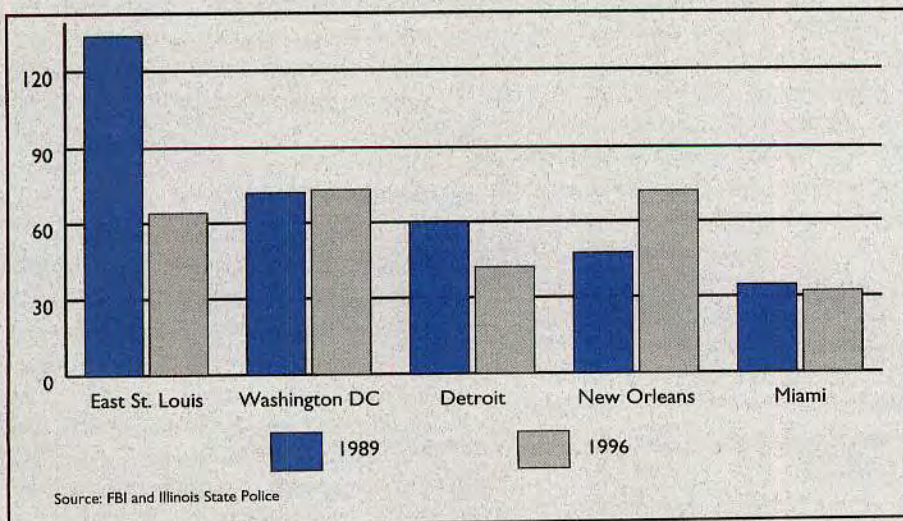
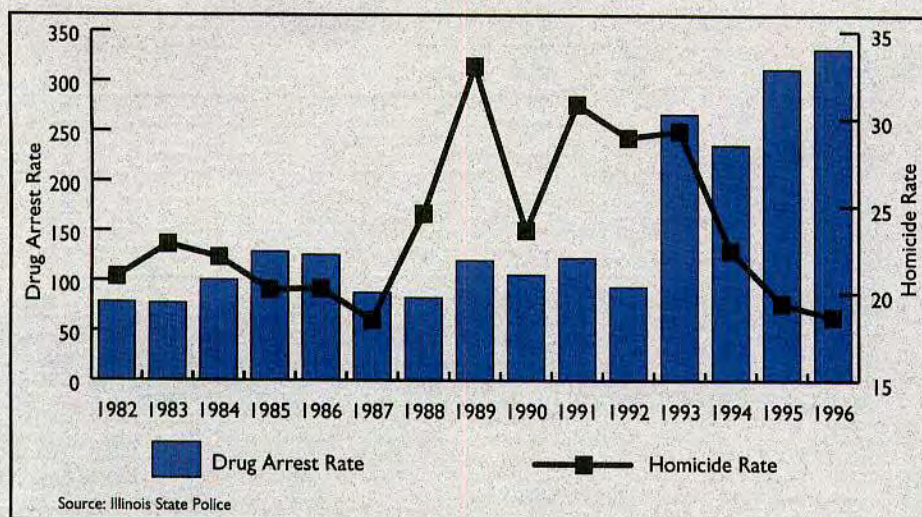


Figure 3
Homicide rates vs. drug arrest rates
in St. Clair County



East St. Louis, to hold users and dealers accountable, and to ultimately reduce drug-related crime in the area.

The programs involved in the Anti-Drug Initiative included:

- A law enforcement component consisting of both overt and covert units. These units were designed to respond to drug-related calls, aggressively pursue open drug dealing, and work in high crime areas. The Metropolitan Enforcement Group of Southern Illinois had administrative control of these units.
- A prosecution component, which added two assistant state's attorneys to the St. Clair County State's Attorney's Office. These prosecutors specialized in drug trafficking cases originating in East St. Louis, with repeat offenders as a high priority. A financial investigator also was added to assist with the identification of assets subject to seizure and forfeiture.
- A full-time attorney and secretary in the St. Clair County Public Defender's Office to handle drug possession and delivery cases, as well as drug related violent crime.
- The development of a specialized probation program and additional probation officers. An Intensive Drug Abuse Program and an Intensive Probation Supervision Unit also were implemented.

■ A community service program designed to relieve jail crowding through the availability of an alternative sentencing program, the Alternative Offender Work Program (AOWP).

■ Additional resources for substance abuse treatment through the Illinois Department of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse and the Mental Health Center of St. Clair County.

■ The Initiative also involved the services of other agencies, including the East St. Louis Police Department, the Illinois State Police, and the East St. Louis Housing Authority.

In addition to the East St. Louis Anti-Drug Initiative, a Homicide and Violent Crime Strike Force program was developed and implemented as a joint venture with the Illinois State Police and the Illinois Attorney General. This task force began operating in Madison and St. Clair counties in May 1992. Due to the lack of resources available to local police departments, the program was intended to provide additional law enforcement resources that would focus on unsolved homicides in the area and work with local police departments to decrease the backlog of unsolved violent crimes. Given the high number of unsolved homicides in East St. Louis, it was clear that most of the task force cases would come from that community.

Evaluation findings of the Anti-Drug Initiative and the Homicide and Violent Crime Strike Force

Analyses of aggregate data, and the results of formal, independent evaluations of the East St. Louis Anti-Drug Initiative and the Homicide and Violent Crime Strike Force revealed that many of the positive changes in the community can be attributed to these program efforts.

Considering the available aggregate data, it is clear that the number of homicides in East St. Louis decreased dramatically subsequent to the implementation of the two programs. While one program was designed to address homicide cases directly, the other attempted to address the relationship between drugs and violence. Based on the activities of the East St. Louis Anti-Drug Initiative, the number of drug offenders identified, prosecuted, convicted, and either incarcerated or supervised more closely in the community, increased dramatically. Between 1992 and 1996, the number of drug arrests in St. Clair County more than tripled.

These efforts had a clear impact on public perceptions in the community. Surveys of East St. Louis citizens and community leaders revealed that more than three-quarters felt that police were more visible in the area and more than 80 percent felt that community safety had improved. With respect to drug activity and enforcement, most citizens rated the overt drug enforcement unit as either excellent or very good. Approximately 40 percent of citizens surveyed, and over half of the community leaders surveyed, felt that since the program had been operating, the problems associated with crack houses and street-level drug dealing had improved.

While most residents who were surveyed did not feel as though adult and juvenile drug use in the community had improved, other information sources indicate a decrease in the use of cocaine, at least among adult arrestees. As stated earlier, the proportion of arrestees in St. Clair County testing positive for cocaine through the Drug Use Forecasting program decreased from 32 percent to 23 percent between 1991 and 1995. Thus,

while public perceptions of drug use may not indicate a decrease, data from the DUF program is somewhat encouraging.

The Homicide and Violent Crime Strike Force opened 72 cases of unsolved crimes during the funding period, and at the time of the evaluation, had either made arrests, named suspects, or obtained guilty pleas or convictions in 57 cases. The 72 task force cases involved charges or potential charges against 105 suspects named in case files, and 80 of those suspects were arrested (77.8 percent) during the evaluation period. Based on surveys of criminal justice practitioners and residents, the task force had a positive impact. Representatives from local police departments felt that the infusion of additional homicide investigators helped relieve caseload pressures on local departments, while prosecutors and judges appreciated the ability of the task force in locating witnesses and assuring their presence at trial. The interviewed practitioners were nearly unanimous in their perception that the task force was a factor in the decline in homicides in the

region. The reasons for this perception included the fact that many of the offenders identified by the task force were responsible for multiple killings, indicating a pattern of homicidal conduct, and that the task force offered local police departments an opportunity to react more effectively to new cases by freeing up the local department's resources from other time consuming cases. Most of the community members interviewed also perceived the task force as necessary and as significantly impacting the community.

Conclusion

While the decrease in East St. Louis' homicide rate is positive, it is clear that efforts to improve the capacity of the local communities to address crime and drug use must continue. Other areas of Illinois are now experiencing the emergence of new drugs, such as methamphetamines, and the violence associated with drug markets and drug use. What took place in St. Clair County was a concerted effort by both state and local agencies to work together to improve a situation. It

appears that effort has paid off to some extent in the reduction of homicides and increased arrests targeting drug violators. Although the residents of East St. Louis continue to experience a variety of serious problems in their community, it appears that the East St. Louis Anti-Drug Initiative and the Homicide and Violent Crime Strike Force produced some positive results in improving the quality of life in the area. ♦

The evaluation of the *East St. Louis Anti-Drug Initiative* was conducted by the Public Policy Research Centers, University of Missouri-St. Louis. The evaluation of the *Homicide and Violent Crime Strike Force in Madison and St. Clair Counties* was conducted by the Center for Legal Studies, Institute for Public Affairs, University of Illinois at Springfield; it was featured in a March 1998 *On Good Authority*.

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