

HIGHGROUND

ERINN FIGG | WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 2014

The legacy of Blue CRUSH



Blue Crush Tactical Platform

Using technology and analytics, the Blue CRUSH program pioneered new ways to solve and prevent crime. Almost ten years later this strategy is being implemented across the globe, while MPD continues to innovate in the fight against crime.

Retired University of Memphis criminology professor Richard Janikowski is renowned for his ability to harness the power of data to predict and prevent crime. Former Memphis Police Department Director Larry Godwin, now deputy commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, is equally admired for his ardent pursuit of criminals. When the two men joined forces in 2005, they made crime-fighting history – and with a name worthy of a superhero franchise.

Blue CRUSH – a proactive, predictive policing approach based on statistical history – is a well-known Memphis success. While Blue CRUSH (short for Crime Reduction Using Statistical History) revolutionized police tactics in Memphis, its impact ultimately extended far beyond the city's limits. Once Memphis crime rates began to drop significantly and word about the program's success began to spread, law enforcement officials from around the globe sought Janikowski's and Godwin's counsel in modeling similar programs. What's more, in Memphis the workings of the initiative became a familiar concept on the streets and in most households. It was one of the first police programs that included a strong public relations push to get neighborhoods and businesses behind it.

And the story of Blue CRUSH is almost legend at this point. The program's beginnings demonstrate the power of collaborative innovation in the city, but the future of Blue CRUSH underscores how vital community-oriented programs are in the landscape of crime prevention.

In the Beginning

Through prior partnerships with the MPD, Janikowski had been laying the groundwork for the program for several years before the 2005 launch. In 1997, the National Institute of Justice selected Memphis as one of five pilot cities to participate in the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative. These cities were tasked with developing and implementing data-driven interventions for tackling their most pressing crime problems. The other four cities chose

firearms crime as their targets. Memphis chose sexual assault.

"Memphis had ranked at the top in the nation for forcible rape for 20 years. That year, it had really peaked. We had 938 forcible rapes in one year," Janikowski said. "So we did an investigative data analysis, looked at certain patterns, and did qualitative research interviewing victims. Then we discovered these concentrations."

One of those concentrations was convenience stores in high-poverty areas. In those days before wide cell phone use, women without house phones would often use the pay phone at the local convenience store. Usually these phones were located on the side of the building, where there were no windows and hardly any lighting.

"It didn't take predators long to figure out those were good target areas for hunting," Janikowski said. "The solution wasn't very complicated: Move the phones inside and you've solved a bunch of your problems. We did and, sure enough, those rates went down."

As a result of the research, the MPD changed the way it conducted rape investigations and launched several suppression, intervention and prevention approaches. By 2000, although other categories of crime were on the rise, the number of forcible rapes reported to the police in Memphis had dropped to 574. The lesson learned was that data often has important stories to tell, not only about where and when a certain crime occurred but also, in some cases, why and how to stop it from happening again.

In 2001, Janikowski next partnered with the MPD for Project Safe Neighborhoods, a nationwide gun crime reduction strategy that also required data-driven intervention. That initiative, which leaned heavily on a new database that gave PSN task force members swift access to key suspect information, was also a success. By 2004, the Western District of Tennessee saw a 407 percent increase in federal gun crime prosecutions. Meanwhile, from 2002 to 2003, firearm-related homicides fell by 16.4 percent, and aggravated assaults committed with firearms fell by 10.7 percent.

In 2005, over a table at Piccadilly Cafeteria, Janikowski, Godwin, then-District Attorney Bill Gibbons, the U.S. attorney and several key members of MPD command staff tossed around ideas for halting the skyrocketing crime rates in Memphis. "Godwin turned to me and said, 'You've done it before with data. Can we do it for all different kinds of

crimes?” Janikowski said. “I said, ‘Sure, but I’m going to need that data on a regular basis – ongoing crime, arrest records, offense data, all of it.’”

Godwin recalls initially being taken aback by that request. “My first thought was, ‘I can’t be sharing all this stuff with the University.’ My next thought was, ‘What the heck? It’s public record anyway.’”

And with that leap of faith, Blue CRUSH was born.

Blue CRUSH in Action

Janikowski immediately started examining both past and current MPD data on an ongoing basis.

“By using a combination of statistics and mapping, something became evident: Yes, you might have a hot ward, but if you look at the data, you can usually find one or two blocks that’s driving the crime there,” Janikowski said. “You could also find patterns of offenses.”

The team learned that putting officers in locations and times that matched those offense patterns resulted in either deterring criminals or catching them. During a pilot operation of the program in 2005, the MPD made 70 arrests in the first two hours – the number usually made on an average weekend. Within three days, those arrests rose to 1,200. Godwin was sold. In 2006, the MPD expanded the strategy citywide.

Ultimately, the secret to Blue CRUSH’s success was policing smarter, not harder, by identifying criminal trends and hot spots to more effectively dispatch police resources. “Research tells us that the mere presence of a police officer in one place for 15 minutes or more will decrease crime from a quarter to a half-mile radius,” Janikowski said. “So why not move a traffic officer to one of the hot spots?”

More than Numbers

The data, however, was just the tip of the iceberg. Cultural changes within the department needed to occur to make the program truly effective. “You can have all the technology in the world but you’ve got to have leadership, you’ve got to have accountability, you’ve got to have boots on the streets for it to succeed,” Godwin said.

He got to work implementing a cultural and organizational shift within the department. He switched the traditional monthly meetings, which tended to single out one precinct commander, to TRAC (Tracking for Responsibility, Accountability and Credibility) meetings, which involved input from the command staff and all the precinct commanders.

“You have to get your command staff and sell it to them and say, ‘Hey we have an opportunity here to make a big difference in our community, and guys, we’re going to have fun doing it.’ We pitched it that way, and the results were much more than I anticipated,” Godwin said. In addition, he and Janikowski attended more than 200 community and neighborhood watch meetings to generate support among the public.

And then there was the technology. Godwin fought for, and won, a \$3.5 million Real Time Crime Center, complete with monitors and ticker tape that reported every crime, every report, every call — all of it so quickly that analysts could begin running suspect information almost immediately.

“It put information in the officers’ hands in a matter of minutes,” Godwin said of the Center.

He also put PDAs in the officers’ hands for faster communication. And he installed temporary and permanent cameras in high-crime areas, as well as high-tech license-plate reading cameras on some police cars.

“All those little pieces just really contributed to one great thing that was happening,” Godwin said. “It wasn’t one piece or a silver bullet. It was a combination of targeting the right spot, analyzing the data properly, feeding the officers information in real time, getting the reports and investigator on it as quickly as possible, and identifying a suspect — all those different things.”

The Next Chapter

During the six years after Blue CRUSH launched, the results were astounding. By early 2013, Memphis had seen a more than a 30 percent reduction in serious crime overall and a 20 percent reduction in violent crime. Additionally, the number of cases solved in the MPD’s Felony Assault Unit rose from 16 percent to nearly 70 percent.

Once the Blue CRUSH program went citywide, Janikowski began the process of preparing to leave the program in good hands. “At the end of 2006, we began training MPD analysts so they could do the same kind of analyses. By 2007, they were taking it over,” Janikowski said. “The whole purpose of having the university work on it was to help build the capacity within the agency so eventually they could absorb and run it.”

Godwin retired from the MPD in April 2011 after six years as director. He’s now working on using predictive analytics on a statewide level for traffic safety with the C.R.A.S.H. (Crash Reduction Analyzing Statistical History) initiative. Meanwhile, new MPD Director Toney Armstrong has shifted the focus of the Blue CRUSH program somewhat to allow for new initiatives — such as his Community Outreach Program (C.O.P.) — that build support systems and more effective neighborhood intervention programs in hot-spot areas.

Michelle Fowlkes, executive director of the crime-reduction initiative Operation Safe Community, can see the value in this evolution. She offers Denver Park in Frayser as an example of the community and police working together to make positive changes. Once overrun by drug dealers, the park is now a safe place for kids and families to play. “By presenting this data to the general public, service providers are better equipped to provide services to targeted groups,” Fowlkes said. “Most of the work has been geared toward specific hot-spot areas with the hope that collectively we will have an impact on crime, but also that we will increase awareness among those residents and they will be empowered to support safe community efforts.”

Janikowski also approves of supplementing data-driven policing with community outreach. Blue CRUSH was never meant to be the be-all and end-all to crime fighting, he said. It was meant to be an effective tool to open the doors to more solutions. “Community-oriented programs are the next iteration of it. You can only temporarily suppress chronic hot spots. All of our research shows that chronic concentrated hot spots are always in certain areas, and that solution takes more than just hot spot policing. It takes community-oriented and problem-oriented policing, as well. What’s driving that chronic crime and what can we do about it? That’s the next important step.”

Read more articles by Erinn Figg.

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