

**2002 Herman Goldstein Award
Project Summary**

**The Drive-by Shooting Response Team (DSRT)
El Paso Police Department**

In the early 1990s, crime in El Paso, Texas, seemed to be increasing in record proportions, especially crime involving young people, such as gang violence and drive-by shootings. In 1992, drive-by shootings had increased 135% over the year before. Gang-related murders were up by 156% while overall murders were up 55% for the same period.

In 1995, the Drive-by Shooting Response Team (DSRT) was created. Several other gang diversion and enforcement tactics had been tried, but the DSRT had a special mission: to respond immediately to the scene of violent gang-related incidents and to conduct a continuous investigation around the clock until an arrest was made or all leads were exhausted.

Past experience has shown that when a drive-by shooting occurred, the gangs reacted in several predictable ways: the victimized gang would retaliate, the assaulting gang would convene to "get their stories straight", the weapons used would disappear, and the witnesses would be intimidated into changing their stories or not talking to the police at all.

The DSRT works closely with patrol units and other law enforcement agencies, as well as the adult and juvenile justice systems to bring investigations to a speedy conclusion, and 90% of arrests are made within twenty-four hours of the incident.

One critical factor in the effectiveness of the DSRT has been their ability to "connect" with the gang members themselves. While their goal is to eliminate gangs, members of the DSRT have built a rapport with individual gang members, and have developed reliable confidential informants. Another element of their success is their cooperation with other sections within the department, and with outside agencies

In 1996, there were 166 drive-by shootings in El Paso. The DSRT cleared 91% of their call-outs, compared to only 20% of those incidents that did not warrant a DSRT call-out. By 2000, the total number of drive-by shootings had been reduced to ten, and by 2001 it had dropped to seven. The DSRT achieved an outstanding clearance rate of 100% in 2000, and in 2001 they maintained an exceptional 100%. The number of gangs in El Paso has dropped from a high of 471 in 1995 to 377 in 2001. Other gang-related murders and total murders in the city have dropped as well in the years since the inception of the DSRT.

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The Drive-by Shooting Response Team (DSRT) El Paso Police Department

A. Scanning

In the early 1990s, crime in El Paso, Texas, seemed to be increasing in record proportions, especially crime involving young people, such as gang violence and drive-by shootings. In 1992, drive-by shootings had increased 135% over the year before. Gang-related murders were up by 156% while overall murders were up 55% for the same period. The number of gangs and gang members was increasing. Fear of crime was at an all time high and many citizens were afraid to leave their homes at night. A new approach to addressing gang violence was needed.

Located at the westernmost tip of Texas, El Paso is bordered on the south by the international boundary between the United States and Mexico. It is the largest city on the U. S. border with an overall county population of 679,622, and is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. Some of this growth has been attributed to an increase in immigration and the influence of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which has lured hundreds of manufacturing firms to the area.

Across the border, El Paso's sister city, Ciudad Juarez, is the fifth largest city in Mexico with a population of over 1.5 million residents, at least 100,000 of whom cross legally into El Paso each day to work and shop. There are four international ports-of-entry. Two major railroads and Interstate 10 connect El Paso to Florida on the East Coast

and to California on the West. Commercial traffic has increased dramatically since the passage of the NAFTA.

El Paso has a median income of only \$34,000, and over 26% of the population lives at or below the poverty level. Chronic high unemployment hovers at 8.4%, and a low level of educational attainment has hindered efforts to upgrade the city's workforce. Only 20% of El Pasoans over the age of 25 have a college degree. In addition, 37% of the population is under twenty years of age. These conditions, combined with our location on the U.S./Mexico border, provided a fertile environment for gang membership and drug trafficking. By the 1990s, the El Paso/Ciudad Juarez (Mexico) corridor had become a major entrance and staging point for distribution of narcotics throughout the United States, as drug cartels in Mexico became more powerful and organized.

B. Analysis

In 1993, there were 438 identified gangs in the City and County of El Paso. That number had grown to 471 by 1995. The gang count consists of street gangs, car clubs (that meet the definition of a gang), tagging crews/party crews and prison gangs. The majority of gang violence in the El Paso area is attributed to local Hispanic street gangs, which are involved in all aspects of criminal activity. They lack a sophisticated, hierarchical, organizational structure. However, the majority of violence is not drug driven.

Most El Paso gangs have no direct connection to the organized Mexican drug cartels, but these street gangs do have an indirect relationship with the cartel narcotics organization. There has been a large influx of gang members from other areas of the country, particularly California and Chicago, due to the large and inexpensive quantities of drugs available. Other factors which contribute to the migration of gang members into the El Paso area are relocation of families due to Ft. Bliss (a large military installation in Northeast El Paso), desire to avoid apprehension and prosecution, escape from retribution by rival gang members, new criminal markets and higher illegal profits, less street gang rivalry and competition.

Cities along the entire southern border of the United States continue to see a large influx of undocumented immigrants into their jurisdiction. Many of these immigrants find it impossible to assimilate into general society, and a significant percentage joins gangs and resort to criminal activities to make money. The quantities and types of drugs trafficked and distributed by gangs vary from region to region across the country. The profits from illegal drugs are helping to fuel the increase in gang migration, organization, and violence.

A recent development has been the growth of prison gang membership in state correctional facilities and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. For many years, these gangs operated mainly inside prisons to provide security for their members, but a recent trend has been the ability to control street gangs and drug distribution outside of prison. The prison gang/street gang nexus expanded in the late 1980s with the proliferation of street gangs and the subsequent incarceration of thousands of street gang members. Several

Hispanic street gangs have recruited large numbers of members while in prison, under the pretense of service to the Hispanic community and cultural heritage.

A Gang Unit was established by the El Paso Police Department in the early 1990s and was given the responsibility of investigating all gang related crimes except murder, which was handled by the Crimes Against Persons Unit. The Gang Unit was divided into three sections: Intelligence/Diversion, Investigations and Enforcement, but remained centralized under one command which made the unit very effective in confronting, reducing and solving gang crime. The unit was comprised of a combination of 30 plainclothes and uniform officers, who became expert in collecting information about gangs and gang members.

The advent of community policing in the El Paso Police Department in the early 1990s created the opportunity for partnerships to be formed with the community to address gang issues and early intervention methods, and to educate the public to help in preventing and reducing crime. Several gang diversion initiatives were implemented by the police department including the Police Area Representative (PAR), the School Resource Officer (SRO) and the Youth Initiative Program (YIP).

PARs are patrol officers assigned to a specific district in El Paso. They are responsible for addressing the problems and concerns brought to their attention by the officers and citizens who work and live within that district. PARs are trained to assist the public with gang-related problems, educate parents and students on gang issues, and the dangers of joining gangs, among other quality of life issues.

The SRO program is a partnership between the police department and two major school districts within the city limits. Ten School Resource Officers are housed in middle schools throughout the city where they conduct instruction, counsel youth, intercede as needed in police situations and interact with students, staff, faculty, and parents. SRO officers are trained to give presentations to students, school staff and parents in areas including Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE), Gang Resistance Education And Training (GREAT), gang awareness, victim awareness, and resource identification.

YIP is a coalition of law enforcement and community agencies working together to address at-risk juvenile issues. The YIP identifies specific geographic areas that are plagued with gang crimes. They direct specific resources needed to address the problems in that area, through a cooperative referral system. The YIP also offers parenting education and works closely with the schools and the juvenile justice system.

Working with the PAR, SRO and YIP, the Gang Unit began to make inroads into the identification of gang members and reduction of gang crimes. The Unit responded to drive-by shootings and serious gang-related incidents on a call-out basis, but only when *serious bodily* injury was reported.

Other Gang Diversion Initiatives

Other factors that advanced the department's efforts in the area of gang suppression and control include a curfew ordinance that was passed in 1991. The purpose of this ordinance was to reduce juvenile criminal activities and to prevent acts of violence committed toward them. This ordinance holds parents more accountable for the activities of their children.

The Serious Habitual Offenders Comprehensive Action Program (SHOCAP) is a multi-agency program consisting of school officials, representatives of the Texas Youth Commission, County Attorney's Office, juvenile probation department, and the EPPD. SHOCAP targets and monitors juveniles of at least 10 but less than 17 years of age, who have a record of three or more felony or misdemeanor arrests, and have been previously adjudicated. Of the SHOCAP candidates, approximately 90% are active gang members involved in gang activity throughout the city.

Crime Stoppers is another initiative that offers cash rewards for tips leading to the arrest and indictment of felony offenders. The program also offers rewards for information regarding marijuana delivery and possession, graffiti and tagging offenses. Informants can remain anonymous. A Crime Stoppers program is being developed at the high school level.

Despite these efforts, in 1993 there was a large increase in the number of drive-by shooting incidents. A departmental restructuring placed the responsibility for investigating gang crimes, including drive-by shootings, under the Crimes Against Persons Unit. However, CAP would respond only if there was a possibility of imminent death, otherwise, they received the incident reports a day or two later for follow-up investigation. The Gang Unit was changed to an "all enforcement unit" and the officers worked nights and saturated the gang areas. This strategy did not work, because the delay in conducting investigations resulted in leads that were cold and witnesses that disappeared or changed their stories. Shootings and gang crime began to escalate again.

C. Response

In May of 1995, the Chief of Police created the Drive-by Shooting Response Team (DSRT). The police department had already undertaken a number of initiatives to address this problem, but the techniques employed by the DSRT were original and proved to be highly successful.

Past experience had shown that when a drive-by shooting occurs, gangs respond in several ways. One constant factor was that the victimized gang would immediately plan retaliation for the incident. This became an ever-broadening circle and one assault could turn into ten assaults through on-going retaliation. Another factor was that assaulting gang members would convene to "get their stories straight", and would tell the police essentially the same thing during interrogations, significantly complicating the investigation. A third factor was that the weapons used would frequently disappear making it more difficult to link the suspects to the crime. Finally, gang members would intimidate witnesses, threatening them and their families, and the investigators conducting the interviews would hear conflicting stories and encounter "dead ends".

It was decided that the best way to overcome these factors was to make a rapid response to the crime scene. A key element was to have the first responding units immediately "freeze" the scene, maintain the physical evidence and keep all witnesses present and separated from each other.

It became the mission of the DSRT to respond immediately to these incidents and to bring the investigations to a speedy conclusion. The newly formed DSRT was comprised of twelve members of the Gang Unit's Intelligence and Investigative sections, who already had the best knowledge and expertise in the department about local gangs.

They were placed on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and balanced their call-out duties with other, more routine assignments. They were centralized and worked cases on a citywide basis. Their primary goals were identified as follows:

- To reduce gang violence, drive-by shootings and the fear these crimes create in the community
- To investigate serious gang incidents until the perpetrators are brought to justice
- To confiscate weapons and vehicles used in the commission of these crimes
- To coordinate with all Departmental units, other law enforcement agencies and the adult and juvenile justice systems to focus resources on these crimes

The Enforcement section of the Gang Unit was decentralized and the officers were relocated to the five Regional Command Centers. They became specialized units, called Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) in their assigned area.

The CRASH units are comprised of one sergeant and four to six officers at each regional command. They are the first to respond to any gang-related incident when they are available, thus releasing the patrol officers for other duties.

Once called to the scene, the DSRT takes over the investigation. They immediately identify and interrogate witnesses, examine physical evidence and enlist the support of the regional patrol and CRASH officers to solve the crime. The DSRT works around the clock until an arrest is made or all leads have been exhausted. The department authorized unlimited overtime for these officers.

The DSRT coordinates with other sections of the department, other law enforcement agencies and the adult and juvenile justice systems in order to bring perpetrators to justice. All available avenues are utilized by the DSRT including the confiscation of property used in the drive-by shootings, such as vehicles and weapons.

The original purpose of the DSRT was to investigate any drive-by shooting. However, as DSRT members were very knowledgeable about gang members, graffiti tags and general gang behavior, it was effective for the DSRT mandate to be broadened into a specialized gang crimes investigation unit. Officers responding to a drive by shooting or serious gang-related incident will advise the dispatcher to notify the DSRT when any of the following conditions exist:

- There are injuries.
- There is serious property damage.
- The situation has the potential to escalate.
- There are good investigative leads.
- + The field supervisor at the scene deems it necessary_

The DSRT Commander, when deployed, is in charge of the scene unless the incident results in a death, in which case CAP takes charge and the DSRT assists. If the victims or suspects are juveniles, the Crimes Against Children section will also assist in the investigation.

Not all gang incidents result in a DSRT call-out. If the above conditions do not exist, the DSRT is not called out and the case is submitted to the Gang Investigations

Section. However, the clearance rate of the DSRT investigations has been dramatically higher than the non-call-out investigations.

Procedure to Activate the DSRT

1. When a drive-by shooting or serious gang-related incident occurs, Communications will dispatch the area CRASH Team if on duty. If they are not available, regular patrol units will be dispatched.
2. The first patrol unit or supervisor at the scene will obtain the facts and contact Communications, who will then notify the DSRT Commander.
3. If the DSRT Commander determines that a call-out is warranted, he/she will be responsible for contacting an appropriate number of DSRT members to handle the incident. This is determined by a number of factors, including the number of witnesses and subjects involved.
4. If the DSRT Commander determines that a call-out is not warranted, no immediate action is taken. The report is coded as gang-related and is forwarded to the Gang Unit, and the supervisor assigns the case to one of the unit investigators.
5. Upon arriving at the scene, DSRT is responsible for the investigation of the incident. The assistance of patrol units may be necessary, however it is a priority of the DSRT to release as many patrol units to their regular duties as soon as possible and replace them with CRASH units.
6. The primary purpose of the DSRT is to initiate an immediate investigation at the scene and to make expeditious and lawful apprehensions, thereby reducing the likelihood of other drive-by shootings and/or retaliatory incidents.

In 90 % of the cases, arrests are made within 24 hours from the time the incident occurs, which sends a clear message to the gangs. This prevents gang retaliation and improves witness and complainant cooperation.

D. Assessment

In 1996, the first full year of operation, the DSRT responded to 75 call-outs out of a total of 166 drive-by shootings. The Team cleared 68 cases (91%) and made 119 arrests (up from 82 the previous year). They were awarded a departmental Meritorious Unit Citation for their success. In 1997, the DSRT responded to 46 call-outs out of a total of 116 shootings and cleared 45, making 68 arrests. Their outstanding clearance rate of 98% received national attention. In 1998, the total number of drive-by shootings was down to 59. The DSRT responded to 28 and cleared 27 (96%), making 39 arrests.

The number of gangs, gang-related murders and total murders has decreased as well.

The ongoing success of the DSRT can be attributed to several elements:

- The recognition and acknowledgment by the El Paso Police Department of the seriousness of the problem of gang violence. Without the backing and support of the administration, the DSRT would be "just another program". The department's unlimited overtime allows the DSRT to work a case from the initial call-out to the investigative conclusion, and most arrests occur within 24 hours.
- The excellent working relationship between the patrol/CRASH units and the DSRT. With training provided by the department, the first responding unit can "freeze" the scene, and the immediate response allows the DSRT to interview witnesses, suspects, victims and complainants before they leave the scene.

i A third important element is the cooperation between the Gang UnitIDSRT and other agencies. Two intelligence investigators are assigned to the regional FBI Gang Task Force. Good working relationships have been established with local prosecutors, judges, and other members of El Paso justice system.

A critical factor to the DSRT's success is their ability to connect with gang members. While their goal is to eliminate gangs, members of the DSRT have developed an excellent rapport with various gang members. During a call-out, Team members treat their "guests" with respect, without compromising interrogations. This has also enabled them to develop reliable confidential informants.

- o Finally, it is the dedication of the DSRT members to the Gang Unit. With a willingness to "go the extra mile" on each case and a strong sense of esprit de corps and unit cohesion, the DSRT continues to operate successfully.

E. Agency and Officer Information

Staffing

Criteria were established for the DSRT and Gang Unit personnel. Requirements include four years experience as a police officer, above average performance evaluations, strong report writing and oral communication skills, strong interview and interrogation skills, strong conflict resolution and problem solving skills, and a working knowledge of the area gangs.

The DSRT personnel are continuously trained and kept abreast of the most current gang trends and tactics. They attend gang conferences around the country and communicate constantly with other law enforcement agencies. In turn, the Gang Unit continuously trains the department's patrol officers, along with school administrators and faculty, hospital personnel, businesses, parents and youth throughout the community. They also work closely with other law enforcement agencies, sharing information and strategies.

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