

Abstract

Scanning:

The eleven hundred block of 59th Place, a residential street within the unincorporated area of Los Angeles County, became heavily infested with gang members who were vastly involved in narcotics sales activity.

Analysis:

It was discovered during analysis that the drug sales were a twenty-four hour a day operation. The suspects were "Maldito Florencia" gang members using five dwellings as "Safe Houses" to hold their drugs and hide from police, each of these "Safe Houses" were rented by "Maldito Florencia" gang members. A vast majority of the drug buyers were non-residents who would drive eastbound onto the street from Central Avenue.

Response:

The first response used was to form a block watch on the street and the second was Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design. This consisted of correcting poor lighting and making the street "one way" only, thereby disrupting the established traffic flow of drug buyers on the street. Another response was to eliminate the "Safe Houses" used by the gang members on the street. This was accomplished by abatements geared toward the landlords.

Assessment:

By the end of the response period, crime was reduced by 80 percent and the community empowered. Afterwards, eight families on the block took it upon themselves to abate an additional rental property. They have continued to maintain a higher quality of life on their street.

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Scanning:

The eleven hundred block of 59th Place, a residential street in the unincorporated area of Los Angeles County, became an area heavily infested with high gang and narcotic sales activity. This block went from one in which families would stroll happily upon the sidewalks at night and neighbors would entertain each other on their front lawns to one in which the residents felt as though they were imprisoned within their homes and were afraid to step outside even during the day. Gang members took up residence on this block and suddenly countless gang members began to congregate on the street for the express purpose of selling cocaine and marijuana. Several houses had become gathering points for the gang members and generally, one or more persons who lived at the locations were members or associates of that particular gang. These locations turned into "Safe Houses" into which gang members would often flee from the police and store their narcotics. After this neighborhood transformation, most persons contacted or arrested on the street were those who came to the area for the express purpose of buying or selling drugs and came from as far as twenty miles away to transact their business, versus being an actual resident on the street.

The problem was identified by the myriad complaints made by the residents of the block and was further recognized due to the abundant narcotics related arrests made on that street. During the year before the operation, a continual flow of individuals were arrested for possession and possession for sales of cocaine and/or marijuana by undercover officers, patrol deputies,

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narcotics bureau detectives, and the COPS (Community Oriented Policing) Team deputies. The sheer volume of arrests for gang and narcotics related crimes made this once ideal neighborhood stand out as a crime ridden warren.

Analysis:

A multifaceted approach was employed for analysis of the situation on this street. The initial method was to talk with the deputies who patrolled the area to determine the nature of the crimes that they were encountering on the street and who the identifiable offenders were. The next step was to speak with the residents in the neighborhood to get first hand information that could come only from those who were living with the problem. Additionally a detailed examination of the Department's computer aided tracking system, the Regional Allocation of Police Services (RAPS) system, was made to see exactly when, where and what types of calls for service the residents were making. It was also used to check the variety of arrests that law enforcement personnel had made on the street. The final step was to conduct videotaped surveillance of the illegal activities transpiring on the street. These videotapes were to not only substantiate citizen complaints but also to provide accurate information regarding the location of the illegal activity and the identity of the culprits committing these heinous crimes.

During the meticulous analysis of the neighborhood, it was established that the gang/narcotics problem had developed and been flourishing on this street for approximately ten years. As the

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number of gang members inhabiting and visiting this street increased and the gang became entrenched in the neighborhood, it became a twenty-four hour a day gang "hang out" with blatant drug sales occurring at the voracious rate of one every six minutes and as many as sixty gang members loitering on the street at any one time.

Through analysis, five separate groups of people were determined to be involved in the problem. The first group was the gang members that were selling the narcotics. It was determined that the primary gang involved was the "Maldito Florencia" gang. Several gang members lived on the street and many others loitered on the block just to sell drugs. The gang members had several motivations to sell drugs on this street, one of which was that the street had eventually become known for its narcotics sales and therefore had a steady flow of customers. Another was that the gang members that lived on the street would allow their fellow drug dealing gang members to hide in their houses when either attacked by rival gang members or when law enforcement officials attempted to make any arrests of the gang members. This gang felt that they were in total control of the street, they continually shot out street lights, making their environment dark so that they could more easily hide from and elude law enforcement officials.

The second of the five groups involved were the drug buyers. The drug buyers' activity was as much a cause of the problem as that of the drug dealers. Those attempting to purchase narcotics on this street were almost always nonresidents who either drove or walked onto the street strictly for the sole purpose of buying drugs. The buyers would drive from as far as twenty miles away

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to buy drugs on this street. It was determined that the buyers would generally drive eastbound onto the street from Central Avenue. Central Avenue is the main thoroughfare just west of 59th Place. The easy access to drugs encouraged the drug buyers. Because of the proliferation of the drug dealing gang members the drug buyers could literally drive up twenty-four hours a day and buy either cocaine or marijuana without even leaving their vehicle.

The third group involved was the residents of the street. The gang viciously attacked and victimized this group. They burglarized their homes; they stole their cars and constantly intimidated them. Any attempts to stop a gang member from selling drugs on or near an innocent homeowner's property was immediately met with violence. Any improvements a homeowner attempted to erect were instantly vandalized or torn apart by the gang members. This soon led to the properties becoming unkept and run down. The residents' quality of life was diminished to the point of nonexistence. Between the intimidation from the drug dealing gang members and the fear of getting caught in the frequent crossfire between the "Malditos" and rival gangs, the good residents of the block were afraid to come out of their houses. The only activity these good people conducted outdoors was to walk or run to their vehicles in order to escape from their homes and neighborhood. Many of the residents were unable to move away from the situation because of the plummeting property values and inability to find a potential buyer of their homes for any price.

The fourth group of individuals involved in the situation was the landlords. They were the ones

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who allowed the gang members to live in and conduct criminal activity out of their buildings almost to the point of condoning the activity. This was because the landlords did not live in the building and either did not know about the criminal activity or did not know what to do about it.

The fifth group was the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department, in particular Century Station, whose deputies patrolled this street. They were affected by the amount of calls and the constant danger in dealing with these violent gang members. In the year before our response there had been five search warrants and twenty narcotics related arrests at one triplex alone. Several buy/bust and directed patrol operations were also conducted to arrest the drug sellers. All the deputies' efforts resulted with little impact to the quality of life. Almost all of the persons convicted were given light sentences and were back out on the street within several months.

Traditional law enforcement addressed the problem before the "Response" (see page 7), and this consisted mainly of regular patrol. This had no lasting result. Most arrests were of the buyers and not the sellers. Due to the poor lighting and the fact that suspects were able to hide in residences of other gang members it was almost impossible for patrol deputies to catch the sellers. None of the drug dealers were being caught, and the residents felt abandoned and were afraid to cooperate with deputies when asked.

Several underlying factors caused the problem on 59th Place. During the analysis it was revealed that five rental properties were used by the gang members as "Safe Houses" to hold their drugs

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and hide from deputies. This made it easy to sell drugs on the street without suspects having to hold large quantities of narcotics on their person.

It was also revealed that there was an established clientele that consisted of, for the most part, buyers that would drive to the location. The usual route was eastbound on the street due to the easy access off Central Avenue.

Another underlying cause was the environment. The poor lighting and run down condition of the block made the residents feel afraid and the gang members feel welcome. There were numerous broken or shot out streetlights and "Florencia Maldito" graffiti on most walls and light standards. The graffiti clearly defined the gang's dominance over the neighborhood. It distinctly marked their territory and it appeared that the street belonged to the gang members and not to the good members of the community.

The final, and one of most important underlying causes that precipitated the problem, was the under reporting of criminal activity on the street. The residents on the street were clearly either extremely intimidated by the gang members or apparently felt that contacting the Sheriff's Department to report a crime was a waste of time. During the video taped portion of our analysis it was learned that most of the drug sales were blatantly made as residents watched. It appeared as though the good residents of the street had given up and accepted this activity on their street.

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The extent of the problem covered the entire street but was rooted to five main residences. The five residences identified in the analysis were all occupied by "Florenxia Maldito" gang members and were all involved as "Safe Houses" for the drug dealing gang members on the street. The residences were so well known that "Florenxia Maldito" gang members would come from throughout the entire neighborhood just to sell their drugs from them. It was discovered that all five residences that were being used by the gang members were rental properties. These properties were owned by individuals who did not live on site and therefore did not have any personal feelings for the neighborhood. These landlords blindly rented to any one that could pay the rent and did not attempt to screen any rental applicants.

The situational information needed to better understand the problem was obtained by video tape surveillance of the street during the analysis. This tape provided accurate information on the various types of criminal activity that was occurring on the street. It also provided detailed information on the criminals' method of operation, identification, and the residences used during drug sales. The videotapes definitely confirmed the fact that the gang and narcotic selling activity was a twenty-four hour a day operation.

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Response:

Most of the response alternatives that were discussed were primarily traditional methods of law enforcement such as additional patrolling by uniformed deputies, undercover narcotic sting operations and gang enforcement activities. There were several other alternative responses that were different and had not been widely used by our Department.

The first response was to form a neighborhood block watch on 59th Place. It soon became apparent that it was a great success. At the first meeting four residents from the block attended. By the fourth meeting there were twenty five residents in attendance all of whom wanted to cooperate with law enforcement officers and reclaim their street. The block watch became a very powerful tool which both the residents and deputies were able to use. This was because the block watch served two purposes. It was a forum for us to inform residents on what we were doing on the block and for them to give us information. The second purpose was for them to begin to be empowered, which is exactly what the residents wanted.

The second response was Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design. There were several environmental causes to the problem on 59th Place. The first was the lighting, the second was direction of travel on the street by the drug buyers, and the third was the graffiti and run down appearance on the entire block.

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For the first two environmental concerns we called on the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works. The poor lighting on the street was not difficult to handle. A survey of the street was conducted by the Lighting Department. After the survey, streetlights were added to dark areas and repairs were made to all broken ones. The direction of travel by drug buyers took more effort. It was decided to make the eleven hundred block of 59th Place a one way street. This would not only disrupt the flow of drug buyers but it would also let citizens see immediate results from the action that was being taken to correct the problems on their street. The Street Department was contacted to have the street changed to a one way street, opposite to the established buyer pattern. Upon contacting the Street Department it was learned that what was being asked for was a novelty. A street's direction of travel had never been changed in Los Angeles County due to criminal activity. Until now no police department within Los Angeles County had thought of altering the direction of traffic on a street to make it more difficult for criminals, the drug buyers, to commit their crimes. Because of this, the Street Department decided to survey the residents to get their feelings regarding the change. Due to their overwhelming positive response to the survey, the Street Department made the eleven hundred block of 59th Place a one way street.

The last environmental problem was the graffiti and run down condition on the block. A graffiti removal program was started. This was accomplished by having COPS Team deputies, along with the citizens, paint over the graffiti on the street. After the first several times citizens began painting over graffiti without the assistance of the Cops Team. This was a very useful tool not

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only to clean up the neighborhood, but also to empower the citizens. As the graffiti was removed, residents also began to focus on cleaning up the rest of their properties. This resulted in the gang members not having the feeling that they "owned" the street as they once felt they did.

The third response to the problem was directed patrol. Both COPS and patrol deputies were used for this. It was discussed with the residents that if the drug dealers and buyers were made to feel unwelcome on the street, that they would soon leave on their own accord. With this in mind, all violations of the law were enforced to the letter of the law no matter how inconsequential the criminal act may have been considered to be. This directed patrol was made more effective by contacting the District Attorney's Office and acquiring their cooperation with this specific operation. The District Attorney's Office added a condition to the probation of all persons arrested and convicted for offenses committed on that street during our response. The additional condition was that they were prohibited from returning to the eleven hundred block of 59th Place for any reason.

The fourth response was to abate the properties that were being used to house the criminal element and the root of the problem on the street. Due to the fact all five properties were rentals, the abatement was geared toward the landlords. All of the owners had been very aware of the gang and drug activity on their properties, but had failed to take any steps to stop the activity. By law they are responsible to control continuing criminal activity at their properties and so because

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of this, it was decided that these property owners should share with the burden of stopping the ongoing criminal activities occurring on their properties.

Individual meetings were set up with these property owners for an informal abatement hearing. During these meetings, the owners were provided with documents and allowed to view some of the surveillance videotaped evidence that showed the criminal activity that was occurring at their properties. They were then educated regarding landlord/tenant laws and then asked for their cooperation in evicting the problem tenants. The landlords were advised of the potential civil actions that could be used against them if they allowed the criminal activity to continue unchecked without their intervention.

All the above responses were put into place in December 1995 and concluded in September 1996. The first response was started and, once a Neighborhood Watch was in place, the other responses were put into action simultaneously.

There were several evaluation criteria taken into consideration prior to the implementation of the response alternatives. The first and foremost consideration was the safety to the public and officer safety. It was determined that if the narcotic and gang problems were reduced by taking away the gang's "Safe Houses" and customers, we would take away the gang's motivation for being on the street. This, in turn, would make the street safer for the citizens and reduce the amount of high-risk contacts by deputies.

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The second criteria was cost effectiveness. It was felt that the cost of having one deputy as a lead investigator using a small manpower pool of deputies (The COPS Team) when the need arose was much more cost effective than the constant calls to the street. If the response alternatives worked as planned they would significantly decrease the need for patrol deputies to answer calls on the street.

The third criteria was the reduction to possible civil liability. It was felt that the eleven hundred block of 59th Place was a power base for the " Florencia Maldito" street gang and therefore they felt they "owned" or controlled the block. Having this as a power base, gang members were more prone to resisting deputies when in the company of other gang members. This in turn increased the likelihood of force having to be used by deputies when affecting an arrest of a gang member and this in turn would result in inevitable lawsuits.

There were two main objectives of the "Response". One was to significantly reduce the narcotics and gang activity on the eleven hundred block of 59th Place, which would lower our calls for service. Another was to empower the community. This would make it possible for the residents of 59th Place to take back their neighborhood from the thugs that were terrorizing them. Through the community's empowerment, the residents could improve and maintain an improved quality of life on their block. This would be measured by the residents' ability to take charge of their block.

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There were several resources available to solve the problem. The first was Century Sheriffs Station COPS Team deputies. There were three deputies assigned to this area. Another resource was the Station's Bike Team. This team consisted of six deputies. Work crews from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works were used for all road work and replacing broken streetlights. The field deputy for Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, Doris La Cour, was very helpful in coordinating efforts with other County agencies. She also helped secure much needed additional funding for the operation.

All the response alternatives went smoothly. The only difficulty encountered was changing the eleven hundred block of 59th Place to a one way street. This was due to the street re-routing being requested as a crime prevention tool rather than as a safety issue. However, once the County was convinced of the value of making the change, the street was changed without any other delays.

All the above identified resources were used in solving the gang/drug problem on 59th Place. The good citizens on the block as well as the property owners were crucial to the success of the "Response" and were used throughout the process. The citizens were our eyes and ears on the block when we were not there. After the establishment of the Block Watch and the community becoming empowered, the citizens were no longer afraid to contact the Sheriffs Department whenever they saw illegal activities. They were likewise unafraid of being seen openly conversing with a deputy. Furthermore, without the cooperation of the property owners on the block, the task of evicting the drug dealing gang members would have been much more difficult.

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Assessment:

The response alternatives that were chosen had a dramatic impact on the entire block. During the year prior to the response there were fifty two reported crimes in the eleven hundred block of 59th Place. Forty of the reported crimes were narcotics related offenses. As a comparison though from the end of the response until today's date, **there have only been four reported crimes on the block.** Only one of these crimes has been narcotics related. After the response, the gang activity that was left was very sporadic and it was very easy to see that the " Florencia Maldito" gang had lost their power base on the street. When crimes did occur they were reported immediately.

It was clear that the residents felt empowered. During our assessment phase of the operation the residents on the block identified an additional house where a gang member was living and selling drugs. The owner, who was aware of the gang and drug activity, refused to take action. In response, eight families signed a petition as the first step to a small claims lawsuit against the owner. Within three days, because of this, the owner began an eviction.

The evaluation was conducted by the lead investigator and the COPS deputies who shared responsibility for the area. They analyzed the crime statistics for that block as well as spoke with residents on the street. The crime statistics have been periodically checked from the time the response ended. They have also kept an open dialog with the residents to this date. After

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seeing the astounding drop in crime on the street along with the community becoming empowered, it is very evident that all projected goals have been met. This project was viewed as an overwhelming success exceeding not only our expectations but also those of the citizens themselves. At a town-hall type meeting at the conclusion of the response, several residents gave videotaped testimonials attesting to the complete success of this operation.

One improvement that could have been made to the response would have been to start the Block Watch earlier. By doing this, information would have been obtained regarding the extent of the problem earlier in the operation.

There was moderate displacement to neighboring blocks. These problems are much easier to handle because the gang hasn't had a chance to become entrenched in the community. With abatements and directed patrol, these problems are handled with minimal effort. Continued monitoring of 59th Place and surrounding blocks should keep most problems to a minimum.

Agency and Officer Information:

Deputy Dan McLeod adopted this problem-solving initiative at the deputy level. He had no formal training in problem-oriented policing however, most of the COPS Team deputies were trained on problem-oriented policing by attending several specific training sessions as well as on

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the job training provided by the Department. Deputy McLeod is currently assigned to the Century Station's COPS Team and is continuing his work with civil property abatements on other problem properties.

As evidenced by this operation, the improvements that can be achieved in a neighborhood simply using the civil property abatement process are impressive. Seeing a need to work closer with landlords regarding the crime problems at their properties the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department is working hard to form a lasting partnership with them. The two attached articles were written by Deputy Dan McLeod for the "Apartment Owners Association" Magazine.