

# **"HILLTOP DRIVE PROJECT"**

## **A PROBLEM ORIENTED POLICING PROJECT**

A SUBMISSION FOR THE  
SIXTH ANNUAL HERMAN GOLDSTEIN AWARD FOR  
EXCELLENCE IN PROBLEM-ORIENTED POLICING

JUNE 11, 1998

## ABSTRACT

The "Hilltop Drive POP Project" has been an educational and a very satisfying experience (POP is an acronym for Problem Oriented Policing). Our project, which began in the Spring of 1997, evolved as a response to complaints from residents at 20 East Reinstra.. They told me they felt powerless against local gang members and related criminal activity. Residents specifically complained about fights in the parking areas, weapons being hidden in bushes, alcoholic beverages being sold to minors, loitering problems, constant problems with vandalism, and a lack of effectiveness by CVPD towards these challenges. As negative as this communication was, it was the initial part of our problem solving model - referred to as "scanning".

Consequently, COPPS project "1997-8" was initiated. The next step was to analyze this location and to substantiate if the concerns were real or just perceived. With the assistance of our crime analysis unit, the problems were not only confirmed, they were also tabulated and categorized. Armed with these useful statistics, we found several common characteristics. For the most part, loitering by truants (many of them gang members) and transients, led to the numerous criminal acts that the residents had complained about.

Next, we developed a plan or "response" to the problem. We (some homeowners and myself) began scheduling "Neighborhood Watch Committee Meetings". Some of the ideas or goals we discussed were: constructing fencing, installing no loitering signs, installing more lighting, and monitoring and arresting numerous minors purchasing and attempting to purchase alcoholic beverages. One of the top priorities was to call police

(after learning how to report criminal incidents). In general, residents were very grateful for the forums. Most seemed encouraged by the knowledge that both enlightened and empowered them.

Now almost one year later and well into the "assessment stage", most of the pay phones have been relocated, resulting in reducing loitering problems and complaints. Now that business owners have been educated regarding graffiti ordinances and new fencing has been installed, vandalism trends are on a significant downslide. Another source of pride is the authority and assertiveness residents display when criminal activity takes place. Our most high profile success was the "Community Clean-up." With approximately ninety volunteers participating, our Mayor and our Chiefs office became well aware of the involvement, pride, cooperation and satisfaction of area residents and business owners.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

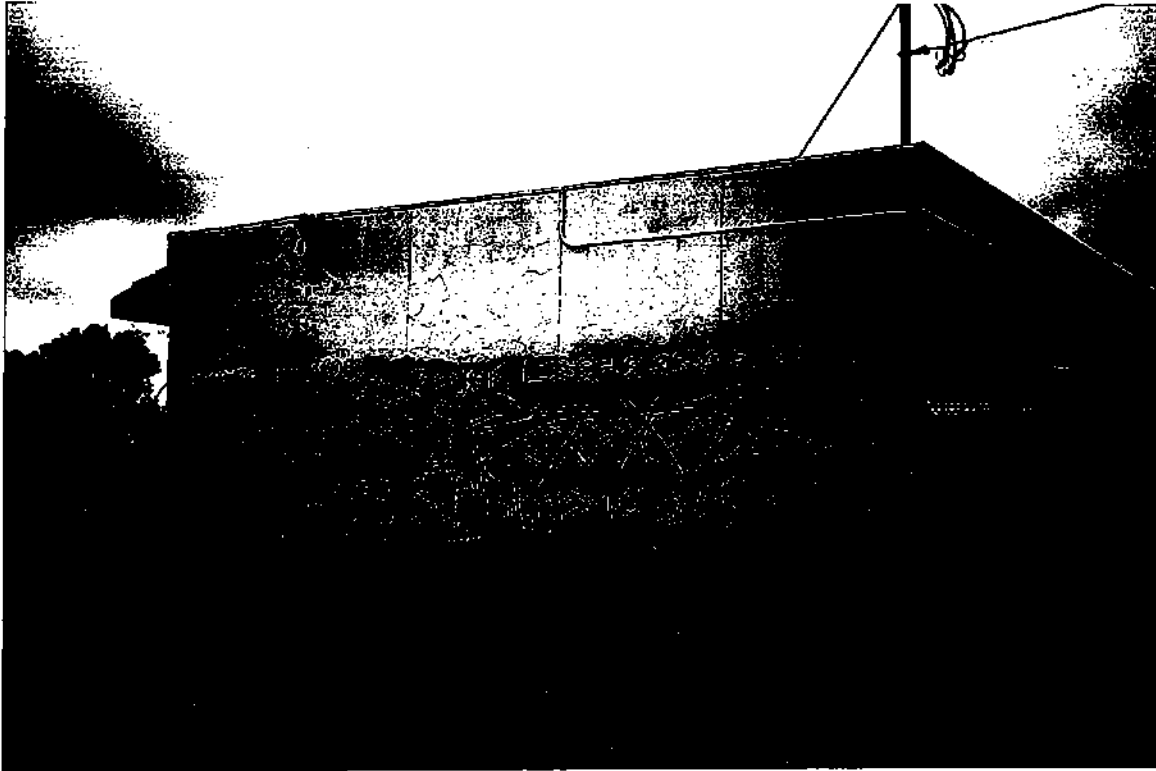
Sara Medina is a single parent. She lives at 20 East Reinstra with her two young children. Sara had become so afraid and frustrated of the environment surrounding her home that she prayed about it regularly. She asked that "someone" be sent to help her and her neighbors. Sara, unfortunately, had numerous reasons to ask for assistance. Her and her neighbors live in an area known for gang related crime and violence. Her, her family, and her neighbors were constantly victims and/or witnesses of various incidents. Whether her home was burglarized or a drive-by shooting occurred on her street corner, the aftermath was always the same ... police officers would eventually show up, a report or a statement would be taken, and everyone would move on. In the Spring of 1997, a neighbor referred her to a police officer who might help her and her neighbors.

Sara called Officer Leo Banales almost immediately, explaining that criminals had overcome local residents and businesses and she had reached her limit. She specifically voiced complaints regarding gang related fights, trash, graffiti, and minors purchasing or obtaining alcoholic beverages. If these complaints had been voiced one year earlier, the response would have been very standard: "Would you like a report taken? We will request extra, additional patrol for this. Please call us if you have additional problems". However, thanks to a difference "mind-set" (due to numerous conferences and training related to POP/COP Problem Oriented Policing / Community Oriented Policing), Ofcr. Banales decided to start a Neighborhood Watch Group. It was his plan to involve the community, analyze the problems, and move towards solving the problems together.

Although Sara works outside the home full time, she generously offered to assist and be part of any/all solutions. She offered her typing skills for flyers, her home for meetings, and her long term commitment and support.

Ofcr. Banales' gang training and experience helped him immediately confirm the described problems. This area was special to Banales, a school resource officer. He was especially concerned about the combination of a liquor store next to a public park which was adjacent to an elementary school. He thought of the school children being exposed to such a dangerous environment.

With assistance from CVPD's crime analysis unit, problems in this area were again confirmed. Additionally, the problem was pinpointed as mainly "disturbances" and "loitering". Disturbances included: problems with shoplifters (especially "beer dashes"), truants causing problems drinking in public and drunks, transients in the area, loud music, and fighting. Our analysis unit narrowed the two main problem addresses as "Thrifty Gas" (now ARCO gas) and "Hilltop Liquor," (1401 & 1419 Hilltop Drive). At ARCO, the primary problems were disturbances and petty theft. On the other hand, only disturbances were the excessive problem at Hilltop Liquor (based on a one year period from January 1996 through January 1997, see attached. After further research it was determined that the primary offenders were truants (the "strip" wall was a magnet for truants), gangs, and transients. Of course, truants loitered in the area as an alternative to being in school. Unfortunately, loitering eventually led to tagging and gang related activity (numerous tagger and gang members marked the businesses as part of their territory).



As a result of truants and others loitering in this area, the downside was very obvious. Trash was strewn throughout the area, especially near the businesses, with the most obvious problem being the work of the taggers and gang members - graffiti.

Prior to our project, these problems were sometimes noted, always complained about, and then eventually ignored. Many incidents were not reported to police. It was the opinion of numerous residents and business owners that police were too busy and/or uninterested in improving these conditions.

Eventually, at the Neighborhood Watch meetings, it became quite evident why and how these opinions were formulated. Open discussions between the police and the public revealed a vast amount of frustration regarding the "ineffectiveness" of the police. A dialogue of accusations and explanations eventually neutralized these misconceptions. After the community understood the role of law enforcement, respect and understanding was developed. Our focus then shifted from being defensive towards each other to being a cohesive problem solving team.

Our solutions ranged from installing signs, gates, and fencing to increasing police patrols and lighting. As a result of our analysis, we directed ourselves to dealing with transients and loitering. Due to research, interviews and surveys, we understood these two groups would be the ones who were urinating in public and/or spray painting the walls.

Initially, our primary responses were education and surveillance. Our education efforts paid off handsomely. Ofcr. Banales personally spoke with business owners and provided options. It was suggested that "no loitering" signs be installed. By doing so, potential vandals would not have the opportunity to hang out and eventually spray paint or mark walls.

Another immediate response was undercover surveillance work. On three separate occasions, all in the Fall of 1997, Ofcr. Banales attempted to determine exactly how and where criminal activity was taking place.

He was able to observe (and video tape) youths loitering, urinating in public, have alcoholic beverages purchased for them and commit vandalism. Soon it was determined



that contributing to part of the problem was the location's physical layout of the area. In fact, Banales confirmed that the pay phones were the mainstay of these young offenders. He had been previously coached by Gang Detective Alex Garcia regarding the evils of these phones, but now he personally witnessed that juveniles would act out or at least say they were using the phones if approached by business owners or police. However, when the "coast was clear" these same individuals would approach adult customers until alcoholic beverages were eventually purchased for them. Once they obtained the beverages, they would walk a short distance to an adjacent park and drink in a group. To no one's surprise, acts of vandalism and numerous fights soon followed.

One of the frustrating observations regarding these problems was that there were no incidents at other stores and strip malls nearby. (One other store is approximately one block south and a small shopping center is located three blocks north, both on the same street - Hilltop Drive).

The activities at these other locations were an extreme contrast. For example, when approximately fifteen youths were seen (and videotaped) loitering and involving themselves in horseplay at 1400 Hilltop Drive, only five juveniles were observed walking through the small shopping center and absolutely no one was outside the store located in a southerly direction nearby.

As a result, one of our first priorities was to remove or at least relocate the pay phones. Of course, the convenience of shoppers and the legality of these actions were thoroughly considered. After all, the phones were privately owned and binding leases were in effect. Eventually, with the cooperation of business owners, a compromise was

reached and three out of five pay phones were relocated from the storefronts to the sidewalk area. With these changes we hoped to, at the very least, mitigate loitering problems. It was our intent that this would in turn reduce other problems such as fighting and vandalism.

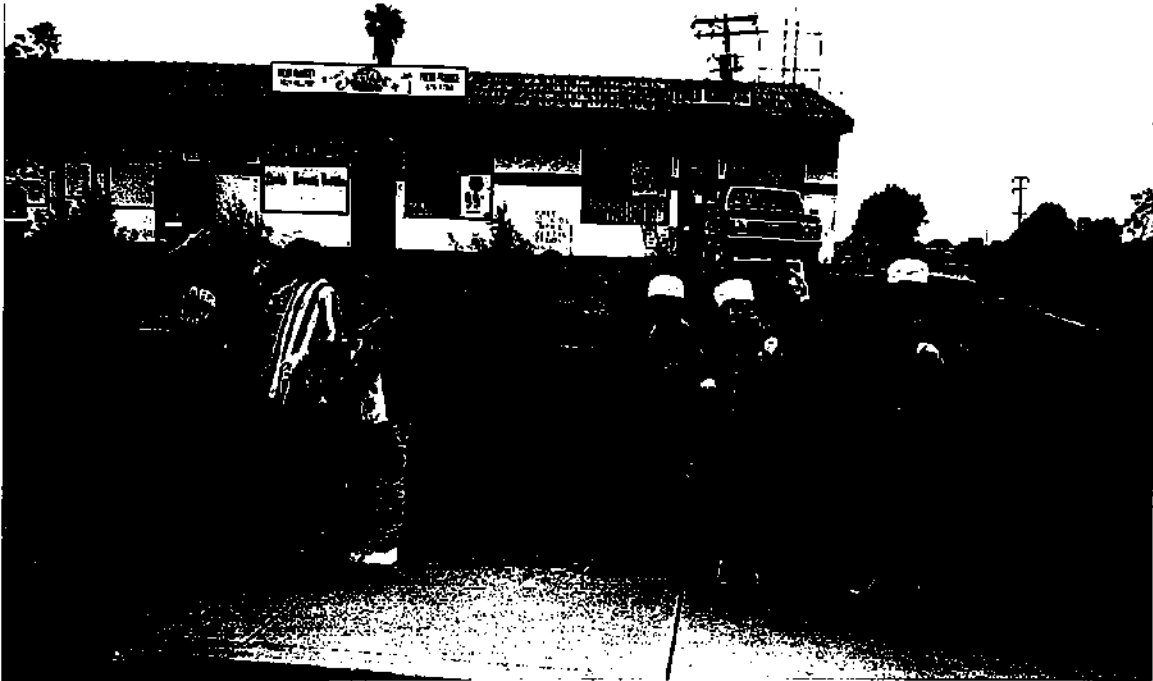
One of the first business owners to assist with the loitering problems was Sam Kalasho, proprietor of Hilltop Liquor. He was quick to post signs to discourage loitering and the first to relocate two pay phones. Ultimately, he soon referred to the area as "a lot better". Additionally, because of changes to the physical layout (specifically the phones), per Sam, "kids stopped hanging around". He even noticed business actually improved as well. Sam was also instrumental in what turned out to be our most high profile success thus far - a "community clean-up day".



One of Ofcr. Banales' partners, Ofcr. Matt Smith, had suggested painting out graffiti. His experience was having local sources donate paint and having community members supply the labor. We planned this event for approximately two months. Ofcr. Smith secretly feared that "enough people would not show up to paint". Fortunately, many, many people were willing to give "back to the community". To begin with, the good people at McDonald's restaurant donated drinks. Of course, between Ofcrs. Banales and Smith, CVPD was well represented, but Ofcr. Joe Cline and Reserve Ofcr. Alex Ramirez stopped by and lent a hand too. Additionally, code enforcement's Steve Jacobson offered assistance (as well as his unit's pocketbook) and they treated almost ninety volunteers to pizza!



Sam, of Hilltop Liquor, provided a steady supply of free cold sodas. Our neighborhood watch group captain, Sara Medina, participated with her children. By the end of our clean up efforts, over one hundred and ten large garbage bags were filled with weeds and trash. Our biggest volunteer contributor turned out to be Loma Verde Elementary School principal, "Marge" Grisby. Mrs. Grisby personally saw that a clean up flyer was sent home with every student. As a result, over half of our clean-up crew was elementary school age students and their parents-



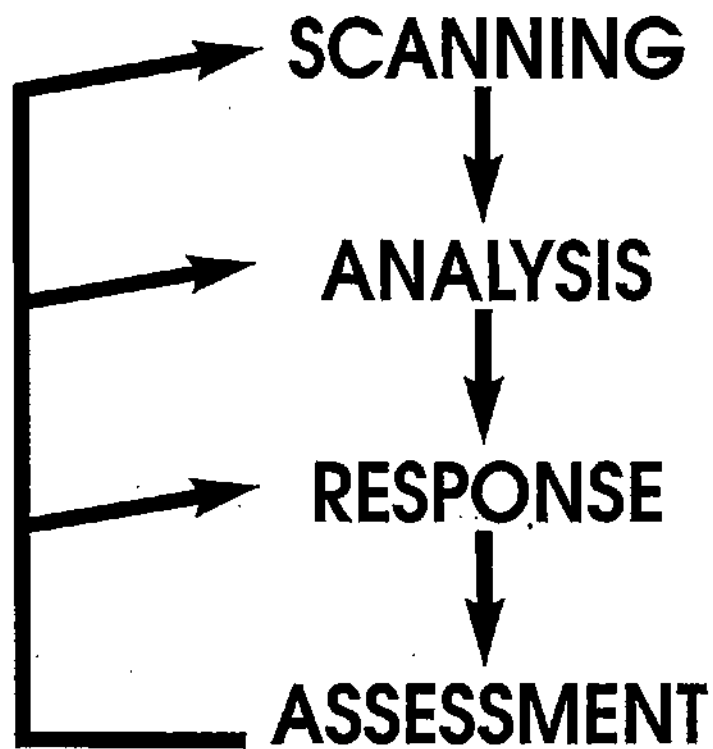
Other contributors included Home base, a local hardware store, Radio Latina, a local FM radio station, Pacific Waste, a trash disposal company, Sherwin Williams, a local paint supplier, and BJ Rentals, an equipment rental company. Additionally, representatives from the city manager's office and our mayor's office pitched in as well.

The results of our teamwork are many and varied. To begin with, neighboring homeowners and businesses immediately began taking more of an interest in their properties. More importantly, after working literally side-by-side, police officers and the general public completely eliminated hostility and minimized frustrations between each group. Gang Suppression Officer Phil Collum commented that calls for service at 1400 Hilltop have been fewer and different in nature since our group started meeting and we had the phones relocated and the area cleaned up.

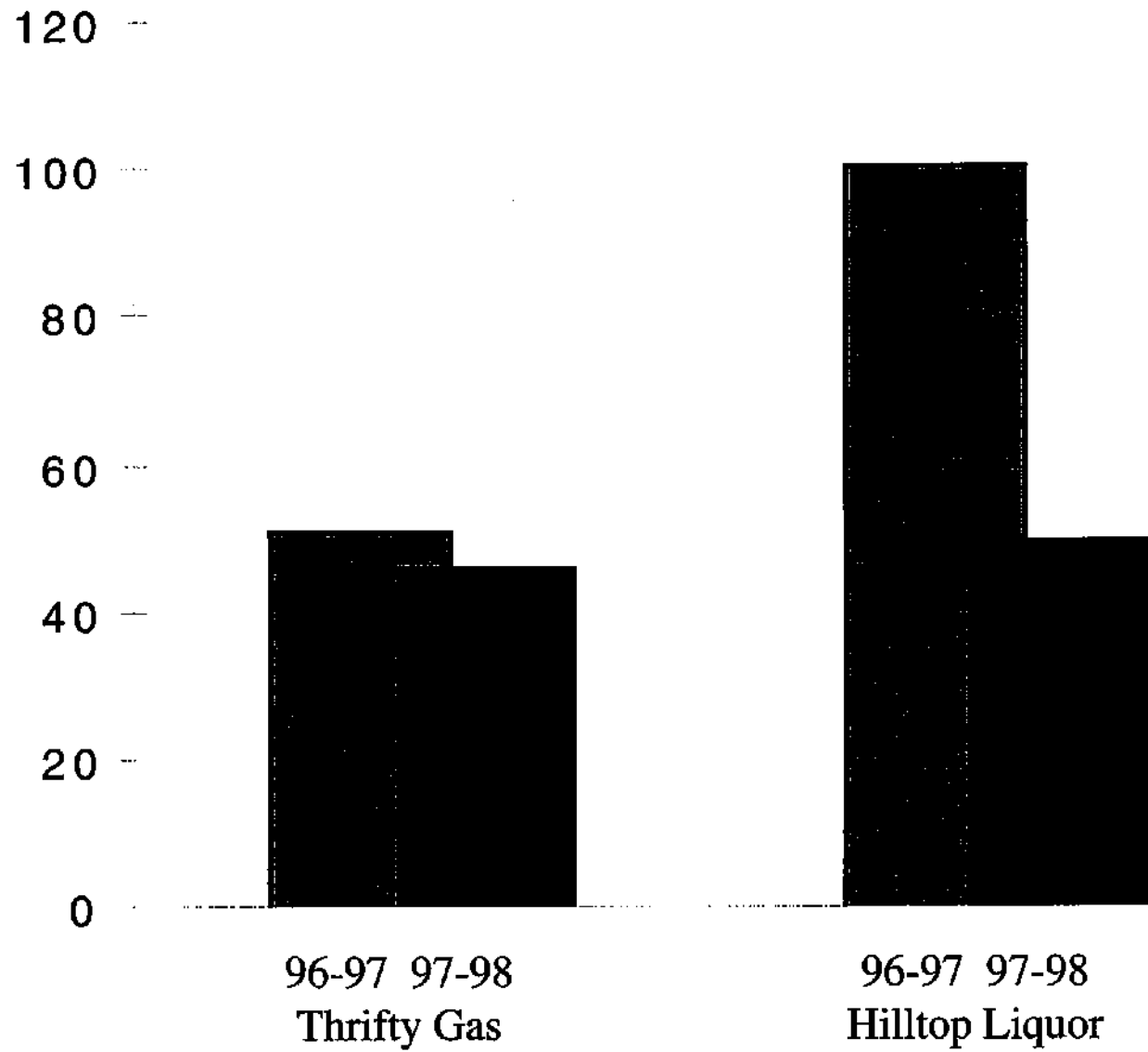
Some of our results were measured by other comments as well, such as Sara Medina's. Sara is amazed that the gang problem has been significantly reduced. She recently considered moving from the area, but because of improvements the past six months, she now asks "why should I move?" She is anxiously looking forward to the next six to nine months of permanent improvements.

Our efforts will require a minimum ongoing effort to maintain our results. The best, most long lasting improvement is a revitalized community. A community that now understands the limitations of law enforcement, appreciates teamwork with police, and is now experienced how to resist similar problems in the future.

# A PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS



# CFS



# Arrests

