Abstract for 1999 Herman Goldstein Awi
Problem-Oriented Policing
RICHMOND (VA) AUTO THEFT TASK FORCE

In late 1997 and early 1998, the Richmond Police Department identified a serious problem: The alarming increase of auto theft. This problem was identified by community and law enforcement observation of the rise in reported thefts, and to what seemed to be target areas around the city. The public outcry and the awareness by their district council members, mandated through City Hall, a police response.

The Richmond Police Department began its analysis by researching reported information through the Crime Analysis Unit and the Detective Division's Auto Theft Investigators. From their findings, the Richmond Police Department formed the Auto Theft Task Force to address the rising incidence of automobile theft in the City of Richmond. The task force was made up of six (6) members from the Richmond Police Department. Personnel would consist of one (1) Detective Sergeant from the Detective Division Auto Theft Unit, one (1) detective from Youth Services, and four (4) officers from Field Services - one (1) from each Precinct with knowledge from different areas being represented. Members of the task force collected information about the theft problems through meetings with citizen groups, reports furnished by crime analysis, interviews with law-enforcement officers from precincts located in different areas of the city, and a self-education process on the part of the Task Force members.

The Task Force responded to the auto theft problem with a number of initiatives, each of which was designed to address one of the eight (8) goals of the unit.

Intelligence - Persons arrested for auto theft will be interviewed and completely debriefed. Any person already under arrest or with a past record of auto theft that wishes to provide information will be interviewed. The task force will identify as many auto thieves as possible and maintain files on each individual. Mapping will be done to identify problem areas of theft and reoccurrence. The task force will also be responsible for monitoring complaint calls received from citizens pertaining to auto theft.

Surveillance - Individuals known to be involved in auto theft will be targeted for surveillance. Methods will be conducted on foot, in vehicles, or in stationary positions located to control suspects.

Enforcement - Arrests of auto thieves will be made at every opportunity. This includes assisting street officers with arrests while the task force is on duty. All persons will be prosecuted, their progress through the court system will be monitored and records maintained. The task force will not get involved in other projects but will assist to enforce the law on unrelated crimes only if they occur near, or in the task force's presence.

Investigations - Whenever possible, the task force will have assigned follow-ups on reported auto theft offense reports with any possible leads generated by the complaint. This is to include information received by a Hot Line setup so citizens can call in with leads or information, but remain anonymous (not having to give their name or address).

Bait Cars - The Task Force researched the use of bait cars. Automobiles were selected by make and model that had the highest record of reported theft. Special Operations Tracking Units were installed. These systems can track a stolen vehicle by a Global Positioning System (GPS) that will provide by receiver, cellular telephone, a

monitoring of the units' direction of travel, speed, and latitude/longitude location (as near as one city block). This enables the task force officers to be guided to the bait car in a safe and timely manner, and at a chosen time, shut down the vehicle's engine and arrest the thieves. The procedure for using bait cars is described in detail on graphs and format provided in this package.

Education - The Task Force realized that the citizens of Richmond needed help on how to prevent auto theft before it happens. Those actions were performed through the Police Department's Community Relations Unit.

Community Involvement - Neighborhood community meetings were scheduled so citizens at different times could attend.

Public Awareness - The public distribution of brochures, speeches, and the display of anti-theft devices were used to train citizens on ways to prevent their vehicles from being stolen. The task force promoted awareness through literature, videos, presentations, and advertisements.

The efforts of the task force are being assessed to measure its success.

From June 1998 to March 3, 1999, the Auto Task Force and Auto Theft Unit successfully:

- Completed 2,100 reports assigned for investigation
- Made 171 arrests - 94 felony - 77 misdemeanor
- Arrested 49 adults - 3 3 j uveni les
- Recovered 196 vehicles valued at $ 1,238,500
- Reduced the rate of auto theft by 20%
- Attended numerous community meetings

The Police Department representatives on the task force receive positive feedback from the community concerning task force initiatives. Training and equipment of

the Richmond Police Department and public awareness promotion has resulted in increased identification and apprehension of auto thieves, including a small group of individuals responsible for a large percentage of auto theft in Richmond.

A.   Scanning

In late 1997 and early 1998, The City of Richmond experienced a plague of auto theft. Auto thieves and their crews were targeting areas of this city at a rampant pace, particularly in areas of the city near schools and the city's Western district. The community and citizens were outraged that auto thefts were taking place night and day, with the same vehicle often being stolen again after being recovered and repaired. They were equally outraged at what they perceived as inaction on the part of the Richmond Police Department, and governmental representation by City Hall.

The City, the Police Department, and the community recognized the rise in auto theft as a problem that needed to be addressed and took action to remedy this problem. The Police Department managers began its analysis through crime analysis and the Auto Theft detectives.

Police Department managers formed and started the Auto Theft Task Force on June 6, 1998. One detective from the divisions' auto theft unit, one detective from Youth Services and one officer from each precinct (four in all), were selected based on their knowledge of auto thefts in their particular areas of the City.

While other problems faced the City of Richmond and the Police Department, it was believed that the auto theft problem demanded immediate attention. The financial cost to the community and the city, public outrage, and the city's concerns were the primary reasons that this problem warranted and received this kind of attention. The task force was assigned the responsibility of analyzing this problem and generating potential solutions to target those thieves responsible for the problem. It was the position of the Richmond Police Department that the creation of such a task force would provide a coordinated effort of police, citizens, business people, and city agencies to stem this plague of rising auto theft. It would also provide the community with a better understanding of police concern and efforts in addressing auto theft, and provide the police with a better understanding of community concerns and frustration about auto theft problems.

B.   Analysis

The Richmond Police Department Auto Theft Task Force, upon its creation in June 1998, immediately undertook an analysis of the problem, which was already clear from the public outcry and the city's efforts being expended to address the problem. The task force conducted an analysis of reported crime within the City of Richmond and concluded that the majority of the vehicles stolen were being taken by juveniles to *ride* to and from school areas and certain other areas throughout the city.

The task force immediately began its educational process of learning about the offenders who engage in the theft of automobiles, and about the victims, areas, types of cars that are targeted, and how the thieves breech the

vehicles' security and start the engines.   The offenders were found to be juveniles that taught each other how to start and steal cars. They would then pick up other "joyriders" and cruise until everyone in the first stolen auto stole one for himself.   These joyriders were groups consisting mostly of males between the ages of 13 and 17, many who go to school together or grew up in the same areas of the city.

The stolen autos were used for everything from riding to and from school or other areas of the city, to stealing radios and equipment and parts from the cars for resale to organized groups buying the same.   The vehicle identification numbers (VIN) were changed in some cars, which were then sold to unknowing consumers. The vehicles were also used in other crimes. The City suffered as a whole by the divisive atmosphere that this problem generated, and by the enormous financial burden on the city government and the citizens of Richmond.

C.   Response

The Richmond Auto Theft Task Force started its mission on June 6, 1998. From those initial suggestions and recommendations, and through continuous networking and research among members of the task force, a multitude of responses has been taken to address the auto theft problem in Richmond. They include:

- The creation of an auto theft database to preserve any and all information gathered on stolen and recovered vehicles.
- Participation in an auto theft hotline to report vehicle theft activity.

- Participation in the Richmond Metro Area Auto Theft Investigators Group made up and represented by auto theft personnel from various police departments in the Richmond area.
- A public service campaign that consisted of radio spots and a television commercial featuring the City of Richmond Police Chief addressing auto theft in the City of Richmond.
- A major media campaign dedicated primarily to television news releases on auto theft.
- Community meetings arranged by the Community Service Division to reach the citizens with education on theft prevention.
- Coordinating with the Commonwealth's Attorneys Office to monitor the cases through the court system.
- Application and acceptance in the VA State Police Operation Heatwave Program
- Involvement in the VA State Police H.E.A.T Program (Help Eliminate Auto Theft)
- Application and acceptance of H.E.A.T. grants for prevention and enforcement, used for the purchase of educational materials for prevention, promotion of the H.E.A.T. Program, and equipment for the task force.
- Coordination with school security to promote the H.E.A.T. Program in city schools, via posters, pens and pencils.
- Long term goal set to reduce auto theft in the city by at least 5% in 1998 with a decrease each successive year.

The Task Force chose these initiatives based on primary findings from extensive analysis. Each initiative was aimed at addressing one of the following primary findings - there was no single coordinated effort within the department to address the rise of auto theft; the community felt that the police were not addressing what they felt was a serious community problem.

When the task force undertook its efforts to address the auto theft problem, it was guided by eight (8) goals.

- Intelligence - Suspects, area, type of vehicle, schools, housing area.
- Surveillance - Methods on foot, in vehicles, or in stationary positions located to control suspects.

- **Enforcement** - Arrests of auto thieves, inspections of salvage yards and tow lots, and records inspections.
- **Investigation** - All follow-ups on offense reports with suspects, and all hotline leads.
- **Bait Cars** - Special vehicles with Global Positioning Tracking Systems to be geographically placed in known theft areas.
- **Education** - Classes on finger printing vehicles conducted throughout the department. Task Force members attended 40 hours HEAT Auto Theft Investigation school presented by the Virginia State Police Department.
- **Community Involvement** - Meetings scheduled to educate citizens on theft prevention and awareness.
- **Public Awareness** - Television commercials presented by the Police Department on auto theft, as well as distribution of brochures.

D.   Assessment

Evaluation of the Task Force's response has been conducted continuously since its creation by not only the personnel assigned to the Task Force, but by other members of the Department as well. The evaluations have consisted of maintaining records of the number of reported thefts and recoveries in an auto theft database, which are used to make year to date comparisons. The evaluation has also consisted of a record in the change of response by the community and the training of both citizens and police.

The success of the various initiatives that have been implemented by the Auto Theft Task Force are also assessed by:

The number of calls reported by citizens to the H.E.A.T. hotline.

Educating task force members through attendance in VA State Police auto theft schools, and information sharing with officers at precinct levels. Field officers have been successfully trained in the identification of stolen autos and how to process vehicles for fingerprints during recoveries. The goal of deterrence

jurisdictions do experience a certain degree of auto theft problems, but analysis shows that thieves responsible for that activity have often been engaged in theft at a higher percentage within Richmond City limits.

E.   **Agency and Officer Information**

This problem solving initiative, the Richmond Auto Theft Task Force, was adopted initially by the management of the Richmond Police Department at the Deputy Chief level, and was assigned to Sergeant Charles R. Sipple for further development and implementation. Through Sergeant Sipple's efforts and trained law-enforcement personnel, the philosophy and approach of the auto theft task force is rapidly becoming not only a department wide, but a community wide philosophy and approach toward addressing a serious community and law enforcement problem.

Officers and police department managers who are involved in the operation of the task force did not receive any special training on problem-oriented policing either prior to or during the execution of this initiative. The incentives that were available to those detectives and police officers involved in the initiative included the accumulation of compensatory time, managerial encouragement on a job well done, and personal satisfaction that their efforts were successfully alleviating a community problem.

The task force did not consult problem-oriented policing manuals or examples of other problem solving efforts, but instead focused its efforts on self-education through the community and contact with other law enforcement agencies, and then coordinating the task force. Fundamental concepts and