



# VARRIO PENASQUITOS LOCOS



**A Problem Oriented Policing Analysis  
of a street gang and it's effects on the  
middle class neighborhood of Rancho  
Penasquitos**

**Prepared by: Detective Patrick Lenhart**

## SYNOPSIS

North of San Diego along the 1-15 corridor lies a growing area of residential homes, apartments, and strip malls known as Rancho Penasquitos. Rancho Penasquitos is a master planned community of the City of San Diego, with an estimated population of 5b,000 people. The average single detached residential home currently sells for approximately \$280,000.00<sup>1</sup>. Apartments account for approximately 15 %<sup>2</sup> of the housing in Rancho Penasquitos.

In the mid 1970's, 1084 apartments were built west of 1-15 on Carmel Mountain Road. The apartments consisted of three separate complexes and covered a three block area. They were owned and managed by two separate companies. Because the area was still in it's infancy, the builders offered fifty percent of the apartments through the HUD (Housing & Urban Development) Section 8 program to entice people to move to the area. Of the 1084 apartments, 591 (54.5%)<sup>3</sup> were HUD occupied. This arrangement worked very well in attracting people for several years. However, as the HUD population grew the incidents of crime increased. Further investigation showed that 100% of the offenders lived in the

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Appraisal obtained from ERA Reality, Rancho Penasquitos, Ca.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from SANDAG (San Diego Association of Governments)

Statistic provided by HUD (Housing & Urban Development)

HUD units. A majority of the crime was committed by children of hard working parents who needed HUD assistance to keep their families sheltered.

As a result, the Northeastern Division of the San Diego Police Department began receiving an increasing number of calls for service within the apartment complexes. The majority of these calls for service involved HUD occupants. The calls for service included: robberies, burglaries, auto thefts, narcotics, juvenile related misconduct, and graffiti. Concurrently, the Police Department received many complaints from apartment residents who no longer felt safe in their community because of gang activity, the use and sale of narcotics, and the escalating crime rate. Traditional policing techniques focused only on enforcement and only temporarily slowed the calls for service and criminal activity.

In 1997, a group of teenagers living in the apartments and the surrounding area formed a street gang and claimed the apartments as their turf. This street gang was spearheaded by two (2) ex-gang members from the Barrio Logan area of San Diego and Garden Grove, California (Orange County). These teenagers started calling themselves Varrío Penasquitos, (VPQ) and later changed their name to Varrío Penasquitos Locos. With the formation of this street gang, the already escalating crime rate skyrocketed.

A large number of the calls for service and crimes were generated by members of Varrío

Penasquitos Locos. Traditional policing methods of high visibility and arrests did not solve the problem. Varrío Penasquitos Locos grew to a membership of approximately sixty members (including associates). The apartments were sold and new management companies took over. After a couple of weeks the new managers began receiving complaints from tenants about the youths and gang activity. The tenants complained they did not feel safe in the complexes because of the youths. The new management had solved a similar problem in another apartment complex in San Diego. They wanted to work with the Police Department within this complex to make the area safer for the tenants and to reduce crime.

Over the next twelve months the apartment managers and the Police Department worked together in a variety of ways. They attended a Landlord Tenant class and were willing to spend the time to check references of tenants. Both were new steps in addressing the complex problems. A HUD tenant organized a Neighborhood Watch Program in the apartment complexes. A security guard was employed by the apartment management to monitor activity during the evening. The management revised their screening procedures of Section 8 applicants to include calling the past two landlords. They performed other background checks which they had learned during the Landlord Tenant training class.

The SDPD Street Gang Unit documented Varrío Penasquitos Locos membership. This

documentation meant Varrío Penasquitos Locos faced increased sentences for criminal convictions and stricter probation. The Police Department made arrests and the managers evicted the tenants based on the violation of their HUD agreement. Most of the leaders of the Varrío Penasquitos Locos were arrested and subsequently evicted from the apartments under this team effort.

As a result of the management's willingness to take action through increased background checks of new tenants, hiring a night watchman, and 26 subsequent evictions, as well as the 47 arrests and documentation of Varrío Penasquitos Locos, criminal activity was reduced from 1997 levels by 20% and calls for service were reduced by 5%<sup>4</sup>.

**Varrío Penasquitos Gang**  
**graffiti, tagged on apartment**  
**complex wall**



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<sup>4</sup> Statistics obtained from SDPD Crime Analysis

## **SCANNING**

For several years the area in and around Leisure Life, The Village, and The Garden apartments have received a large portion of the calls for service in the Rancho Penasquitos area. Many attempts have been made to reduce the growing number of calls for service and the crime rate in the area with only temporary success. A major factor contributing to the Police Department's inability to reduce calls was the participation by the previous management of the apartment complexes. The prior managers were not willing to follow through with evictions and did not want to handle tenant problems. They did not live on the premises, and were only concerned with the tenants financial qualifications.

The full impact of these unresolved issues surfaced in July 1997 when the management companies received new managers. The management company for the Garden Apartments changed to Eugene Burger Management. The Village apartments and Leisure Life are now both owned and managed by Atlantic Pacific.

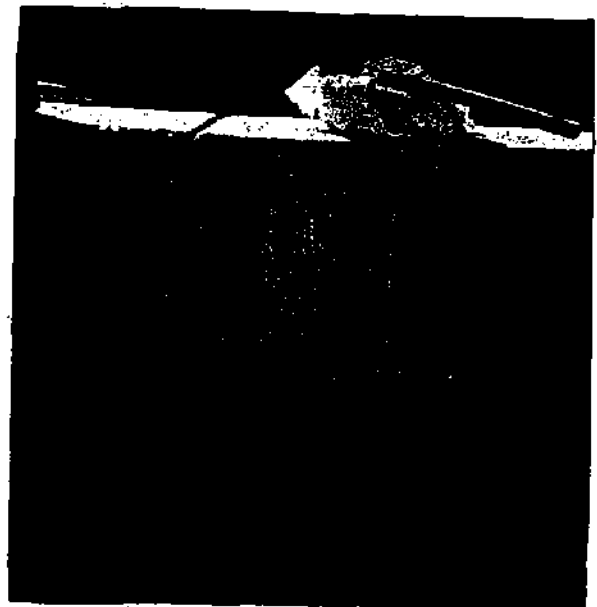
When the new management took over, the managers moved into an apartment within the complex. After a month they began receiving complaints from the tenants about feeling unsafe. This feeling was caused by the youths in the area. The Police Department also started receiving increasing complaints from the apartment residents and managers, as

well as the surrounding homeowners and nearby businesses. These complaints consisted of gang graffiti, burglaries, robberies, juveniles, and narcotic activity. The new managers became on-site residents and had first hand knowledge of these problems.

The Stakeholder's were identified through these complaints as being:

- Apartment residents
- Apartment management
- Residents of surrounding residential areas
- Business owners from nearby strip malls
- Apartment owners
- Juveniles in the area
- Persons claiming or associating with "Varrío Penasquitos Locos"
- Police

**Varrío Penasquitos Gang graffiti  
and moniker roster, tagged on wall  
on apartment complex wall.**





## ANALYSIS

This project was brought before a PAAC (Problem Analysis Advisory Committee) meeting as an Open Project during the May 1998 meeting. The PAAC meeting is run by the Police Department. One of the PAAC's purposes is to roundtable ideas with representatives from an assortment of agencies to get different ideas in responding to problems. They also share projects which have ended with successful results.

Representatives from several agencies within local government, HUD, and other Police Departments were present at the PAAC meeting. They provided knowledge and experience from many different sources. I presented the problems occurring in the apartments with gang graffiti, burglaries, robberies, and narcotic activity. I was looking for different approaches to solving these problems. One suggestion was made on how to respond to these problems. This suggestion involved using SDPD HUD enforcement officers to enforce the HUD rules and regulations that HUD tenants must follow.

SDPD has a grant which employs two full time officers to handle problems within HUD run complexes. They also enforce the HUD rules and regulations of HUD tenants. I was unable to use these officers because the HUD program in the apartments were run as an "in house" Section 8 program. That meant, the managers were responsible for screening tenants, enforcing rules, and conducting evictions. Another suggestion was to review the

HUD contracts with the apartment managers so both the managers and the police knew the strengths and limitations of the contracts. It was also suggested that the Probation Department and the SDPD Street Gang Suppression Team focus on possible street gang activity in and around the complex. The J.U.D.G.E. (Jurisdiction Unified Drug and Gang Enforcement) Unit recommended they be notified when the juvenile court system of revolving doors had produced a juvenile with extreme problems.

Unfortunately, many times juveniles appear before judges in juvenile court on serious crimes such as burglary or robbery. All too often the juvenile cases have true findings and the juvenile is sentenced to house arrest or merely probation. This sends a message to the juvenile that there are no consequences to his or her behavior which subsequently leads to additional crimes by the juvenile.

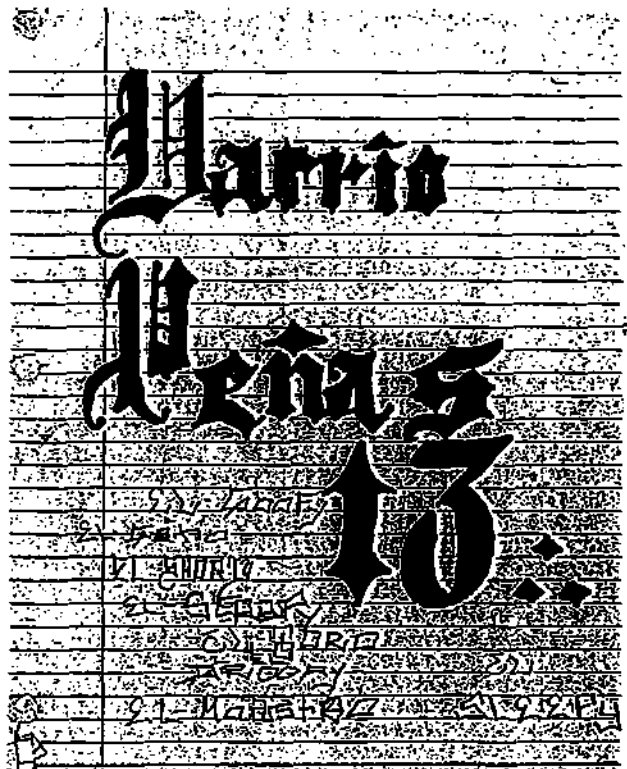
I left the PAAC Meeting with an extensive list of resources and different approaches to try and solve the problems we were facing. I sat down with the apartment managers and we decided to conduct a survey of the tenants to determine the extent of the fear within the apartment complexes. The managers gave the surveys to tenants as they entered the offices to pay their monthly rent. The surveys consisted of a one page questionnaire which asked ten questions. These questions included asking the tenants about their perception of crime in the area, how safe they felt in the area, if they felt crime or safety had changed,

what they felt the Police Department and apartment management had done to combat these problems, and an open area to write in narrative responses.

(See the attached survey).

Out of a total 1084 apartments, we received 246 returned surveys. The analysis of these surveys conclusively showed most residents felt unsafe because of the increased number of juveniles loitering in the area, and because of an increase in gang type graffiti within the complexes and area. Several residents wrote of being confronted by juveniles and mentioned several of the juveniles were claiming to be from a "Varrío Penasquitos" gang. This information was substantiated by the "VPQ13" graffiti found in the complexes.

Note paper recovered from  
gangmember's room during  
4th waiver search



## **RESPONSE**

Patrol Officers, Detectives, Migrant Liaison Officers, Community Relations Officers, Community Service Officers, and Parking Enforcement Officers from the entire Northeastern Division worked together over the next twelve months. There were 47 juveniles and adults arrested for crimes ranging from graffiti, possession of weapons, narcotics, robberies, and burglaries. Four people were arrested for committing over 36 residential burglaries in the area.

Patrol Officers and Detectives worked at identifying "Varrío Penasquitos" members. This was accomplished by talking to the residents and management's children. The children proved to be an invaluable source of information. These children knew everything that was going on in the apartments and were willing to share their knowledge with us. Patrol officers also assisted by documenting, Varrío Penasquitos on field interviews and arrests. Using these two sources we were able to identify twelve hardcore members of the Varrío Penasquitos Street Gang.

Of the twelve members, three lived in houses near the apartments, one lived in the Village Apartments, and eight lived in the Garden Apartments. We had personal contact with many of the twelve who were proud to talk of their membership in Varrío Penasquitos. Two brother's talked of the formation of the group because of their older brother's gang

affiliation when they lived in Garden Grove. This same older brother would later be arrested for robbery. He was later convicted and sentenced to 63 years in prison.

Another juvenile told us he had moved to Rancho Penasquitos from the Barrio Logan area of San Diego. He said he claimed allegiance with "Sherman" while living in that area and wanted to continue the life style after moving to Rancho Penasquitos. I had several occasions to speak with this young man after arresting him numerous times. He told me about the lure of the gang life in filling an emptiness in his life which had been created by an absent father. He said the life of a gangster was fulfilling when he was with his "Family" (other gang members). He told me of the excitement and thrill involved in the gangster life style and stated he had no intentions of giving up the lifestyle no matter how many times I arrested him or put him in juvenile hall.

While arresting juveniles and gathering intelligence on Varrío Penasquitos the crime rate continued to escalate. There were over 36 residential burglaries in the apartment complexes. Most pizza delivery companies refused to deliver to these three apartment complexes because of the large number of robberies they had suffered in the area. ^

The playground located in the middle of the Garden Apartments had turned into a supermarket for narcotics. Residents and managers both complained of the blatant drug

dealing during all hours of the day and night. There were several felonious assaults in this playground area directly related to the narcotics trade.

We believed from the suspect descriptions of the robbers, burglars, and drug dealers that they were most likely members or associates of Varrío Penasquitos. We decided to contribute a large portion of our time and energy to this group. We conducted field interviews, arrests, probationary searches, and consensual contacts with members of Varrío Penasquitos Locos.

Using this information, we worked with the managers to evict several residents. Several people evicted had affiliations with Varrío Penasquitos Locos. The basis for the evictions were the arrests. The management staff and I went to court on six of the 26 evictions. The outcome on each of the contested HUD evictions was upheld. The evictions accomplished not only the removal of troublesome teenagers from the complex, but as word of the evictions spread throughout the apartments, residents started to take control of their children and abide by the rules, knowing that they too could be evicted. ^

The Garden apartments hired a security guard to patrol the complex and report on any activity. The presence of a uniformed security guard increased the tenants overall feeling of safety in the apartments.

A tenant took on the task of organizing a Neighborhood Watch group. This is still in the developmental stages. Neighborhood Watch is historically difficult in apartment complexes due to the transient nature of the tenants. However, these three apartment complexes have a large number of tenants that have lived there for several years and we believe the program will be successful.

The SDPD Special Enforcement Unit, (this unit handles electronic surveillance and special operations) worked with us and placed a video camera in a children's daycare facility. This daycare had been the victim of three prior burglaries. Approximately one month later a suspect was caught on video climbing into the business. The suspect turned out to be a member of Varrío Penasquitos. A subsequent 4th waiver search of the suspect's apartment in the Gardens Apartments recovered property from fifteen other residential burglaries from all three of the apartment complexes. The suspect pled guilty to the burglaries and was sentenced to six years in state prison. However, prior to being transferred from county jail to prison the suspect hung himself in jail. A second burglary suspect was arrested by officers while in the act of committing a residential burglary. A subsequent parole search of his girlfriend's mobile home led to the recovery of property from thirteen other residential burglaries all within the three apartment complexes. This burglar was subsequently sentenced to fourteen years in state prison.

Six other burglaries were committed by two other members of Varrío Penasquitos. They<sup>1</sup> were arrested and each had a true finding in court for the burglaries. These arrests canceled all the residential burglaries in the area during 1997.

Additionally, there have been arrests in the apartments by SDPD Street Gang Suppression Team, Financial Crimes Task Force, SDPD Narcotics Unit, San Diego County Probation, and State Parole. Salvador Alcalá is a gang member from Garden Grove, California. He had a history of extreme violence making him a candidate for the three strikes law. Alcalá's two brothers both claim Varrío Penasquitos and live at the Garden Apartments. Alcalá was frequently seen around the apartments and greatly influenced his brothers. Alcalá beat up a fifty eight year old, unarmed, security guard, and robbed him of cash. Alcalá was later found guilty of robbery and sentenced to 63 years in prison. His conviction and sentencing in April 1998, incited Varrío Penasquitos and for the next several months there was a large increase in pizza delivery robberies, burglaries, graffiti and other crimes in the Garden apartments. Subsequent arrests for these crimes revealed they had been committed by members of Varrío Penasquitos, including Alcalá's younger^ brothers and a cousin.

I spoke with the SDPD Street Gang Unit and told told them of my knowledge concerning Varrío Penasquitos. Detective Garcia reviewed the information and determined they met



the guidelines for documentation as a Street Gang under the California Penal Code. Twelve members of Varrío Penasquitos Locos (as they were calling themselves), were documented by Detective Garcia. Documenting Varrío Penasquitos Locos helped in that it added time to sentencing when members were found guilty of crimes.

This cut short the revolving door at juvenile hall. Additionally, Varrío Penasquitos Locos would now be monitored by the SDPD Street Gang Unit, the J.U.D.G.E. Unit, and SDPD Street Gang Suppression Team. This extra attention was needed to keep these young men from straying too far off the beaten path.

We worked with the apartment managers and helped them receive the needed training in screening techniques for HUD and other prospective residents. Part of this training involved the apartment management attending the Landlord Tenant training provided by the police department. The management staff now calls two prior housing referrals to check on the accuracy of the tenants applications.

## **ASSESSMENT**

We requested the SDPD Crime Analysis Unit conduct a comparison of calls for service and reported crimes in the three apartment complexes for the years of 1997 and 1993. We learned both calls for service and reported crimes had dropped. (See attached graphs and print-outs by SDPD Crime Analysis). The reported crime rate was down by over 20 % and the calls for service were down by 5 %. We looked at these numbers and noticed officers were voluntarily spending time in the apartments rather than actually being called there to handle problems. This time spent in the apartments contributed to the reduction in the crime rate but added to the calls for service time spent at the complexes.

We also followed up by contacting the residents who had returned the surveys to see how the apartment residents felt about the crime rate and criminal activity in the area. One hundred percent of the residents contacted felt safer and noticed a large reduction in juvenile and gang activity. This feeling of increased safety and noticeable reduction in crime was also felt by the management staff.

We determined the problem was not the HUD program or the majority of persons participating in the HUD program. A major part of the problem was irresponsible landlord tenant management. The problem was linked to the HUD program by some of the gang

member / children of HUD participants. These teenagers and their parents were linked to HUD after being arrested and evicted from the program. Ultimately, the HUD program itself took care of a large portion of the problems through their own rules and regulations which allowed for the lease termination and eviction of tenants. Following the evictions of several tenants from their HUD supported apartments, other HUD tenants took a more active role in controlling their children.

Salvador Alcalá was arrested for robbery and sentenced to sixty three years in prison.

## Wanted

*As a public service, The San Diego Union-Tribune publishes information on suspects being sought by local law enforcement authorities.*

**Salvador Alcalá**



**DESCRIPTION:** This robbery suspect is Latino, 29, 5 feet 8, and 185 pounds with black hair and brown eyes. He has extensive tattoos, including his last name on his back, "Gardena" on his stomach and faces of several women on his arms.

**WANTED FOR:** San Diego police detectives say Alcalá has been charged with robbery in a recent attack in which a man was hit and kicked and had his head beaten against a wall while being robbed of \$250 and a bank ATM card. Detectives said Alcalá is a known gang member on parole for violent crimes. He has frequented the areas of Rancho Penasquitos and Carmel Mountain Ranch and is believed to be in Tijuana. Police urge caution, saying Alcalá is dangerous, knows he is wanted and will resist arrest.

**CONTACT:** Authorities ask anyone who might know this man's whereabouts to contact San Diego County Crime Stoppers at (619)235-TIPS (8477). Callers may remain anonymous and might be eligible for a reward.

## **CONCLUSION**

The problems at the Garden, Leisure Life, and Village apartment complexes existed for over 20 years. As result of the community (New management) taking responsibility for their properties and the police department's willingness to look for alternative responses, a long standing community problem has been improved. That is the true essence of Community Policing.

## **PROJECT CONTACT PERSON:**

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**SAN DIEGO POLICE DEPARTMENT  
NEIGHBORHOOD SURVEY**

1. When you think about crime in your neighborhood, what are you most concerned about?  
(Do not read responses)

- |                        |                        |                       |
|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| (1) Gangs _____        | (5) Car Prowls _____   | (9) Vandalism _____   |
| (2) Drugs _____        | (6) Auto Theft _____   | (10) Extortions _____ |
| (3) Fights _____       | (7) Robbery _____      | (11) Gambling _____   |
| (4) Res Burglary _____ | (8) Prostitution _____ | (12) Assaults _____   |
- (13) Other: (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

2. Where and when do these problems occur?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What other type of problems in your neighborhood are you concerned with?  
(Do not read responses)

- |                          |                      |                           |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| (1) Loitering _____      | (4) Graffiti _____   | (7) Abandoned Cars _____  |
| (2) Juv. Problems _____  | (5) Transients _____ | (8) Abandoned Bldgs _____ |
| (3) Illegal Aliens _____ | (6) Drunks _____     | (9) Vacant Lots _____     |
- (10) Other: (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

4. Where and when do these problems occur?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Were you or your family victims of crime in the past year?

- (1) Yes \_\_\_\_\_ (0) No \_\_\_\_\_

6. What type of crime?

- |                  |                   |                      |
|------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| (1) Murder _____ | (3) Robbery _____ | (5) Burglary _____   |
| (2) Rape _____   | (4) Assault _____ | (6) Auto Theft _____ |
- (7) Other: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Did you report it? (1) Yes \_\_\_\_\_ (0) No \_\_\_\_\_

8. Within the past three months, have you witnessed a crime, or been the victim of a crime yourself in your neighborhood?

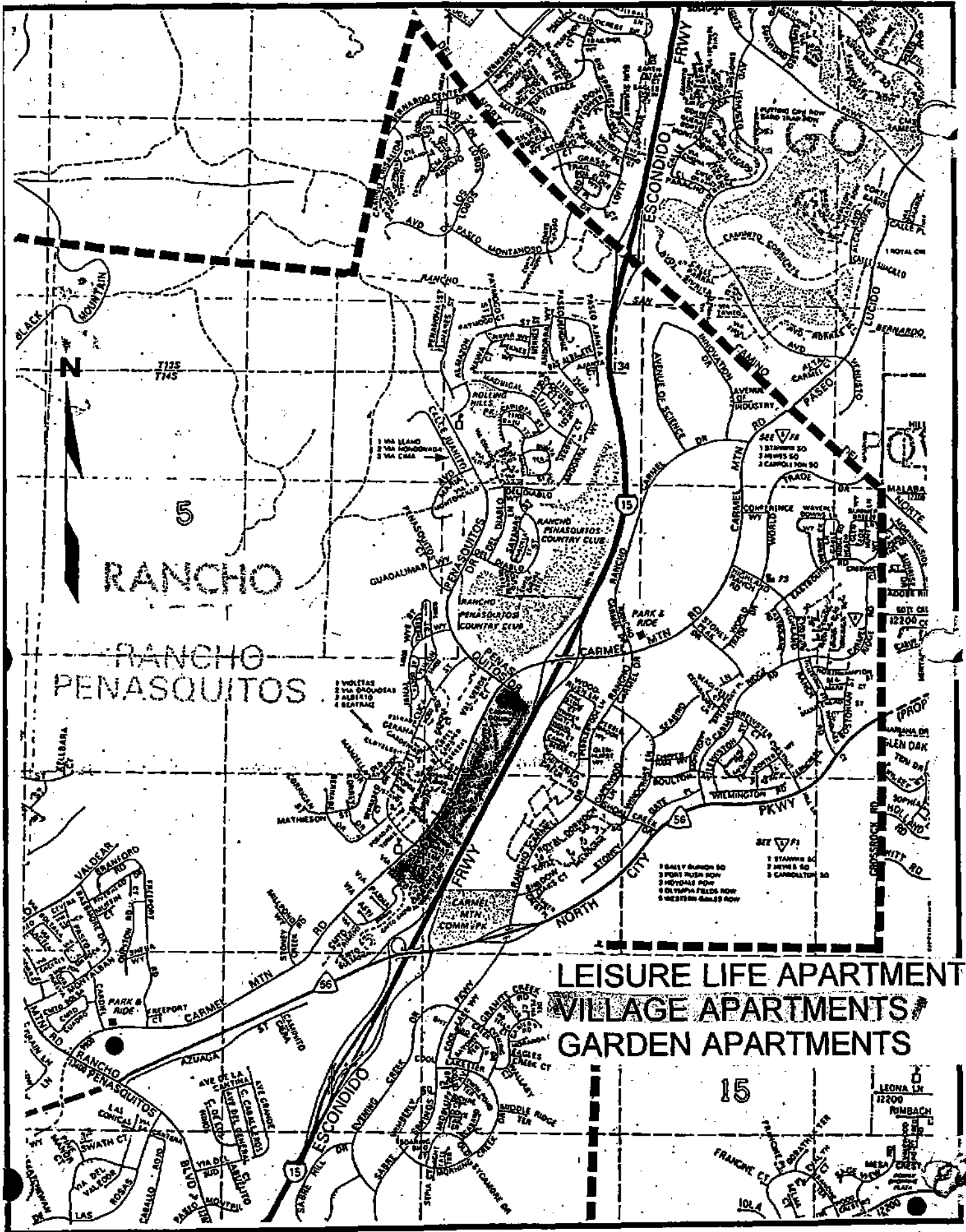
- (1) Yes \_\_\_\_\_ (0) No \_\_\_\_\_

9. If your house was broken into, would you report it to the police?

- (1) Yes \_\_\_\_\_ (0) No \_\_\_\_\_

10. Do you feel that gangs are a problem in your neighborhood?

- (1) Yes \_\_\_\_\_ (0) No \_\_\_\_\_



RANCHO

RANCHO PENASQUITOS

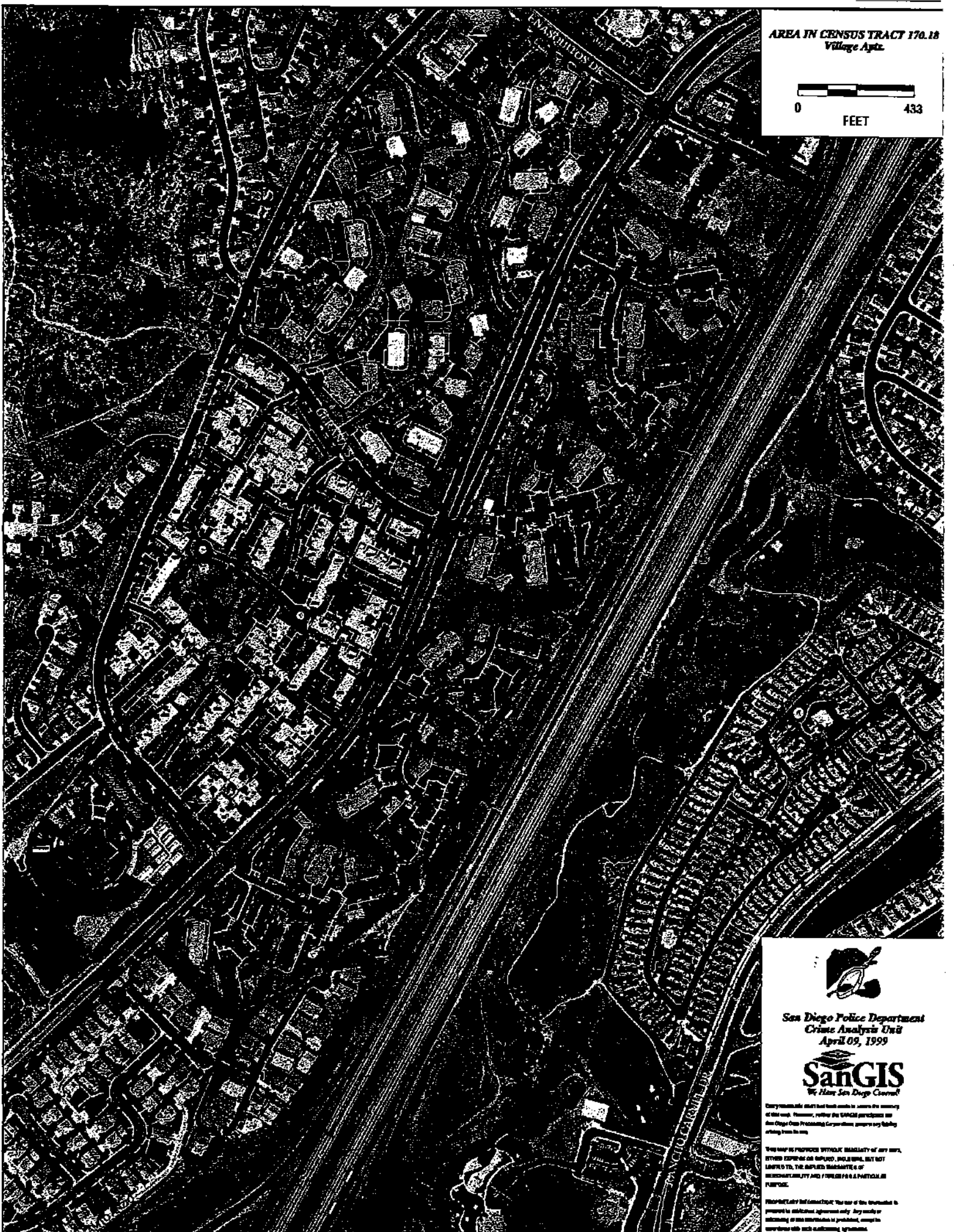
LEISURE LIFE APARTMENT  
VILLAGE APARTMENTS  
GARDEN APARTMENTS

15



San Diego Police Department  
Crime Analysis Unit

AREA IN CENSUS TRACT 170.18  
Village Apts.



San Diego Police Department  
Crime Analysis Unit  
April 09, 1999

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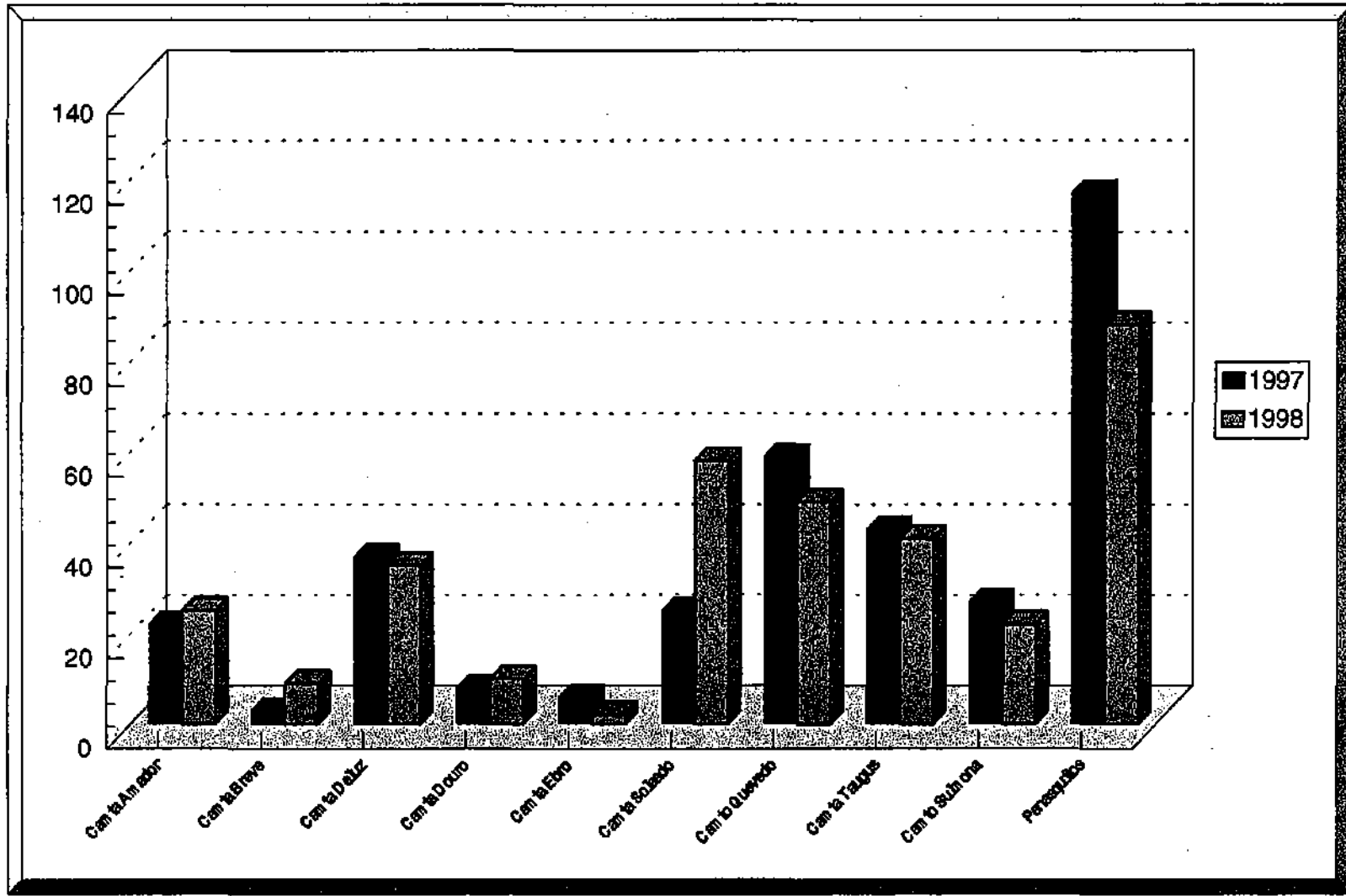
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# Calls for Service By Street (within Census Tract 170.18)

1997 vs. 1998

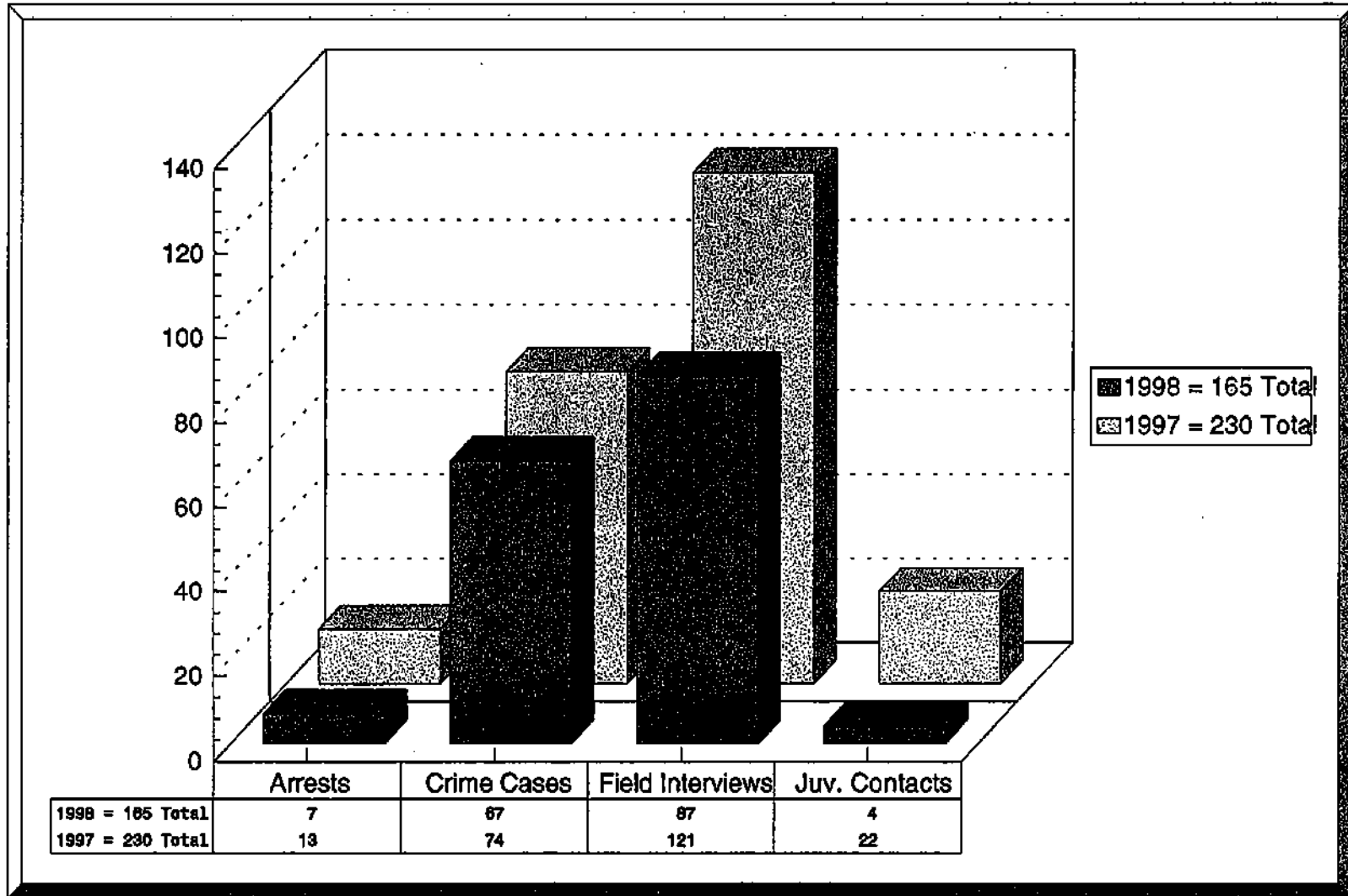




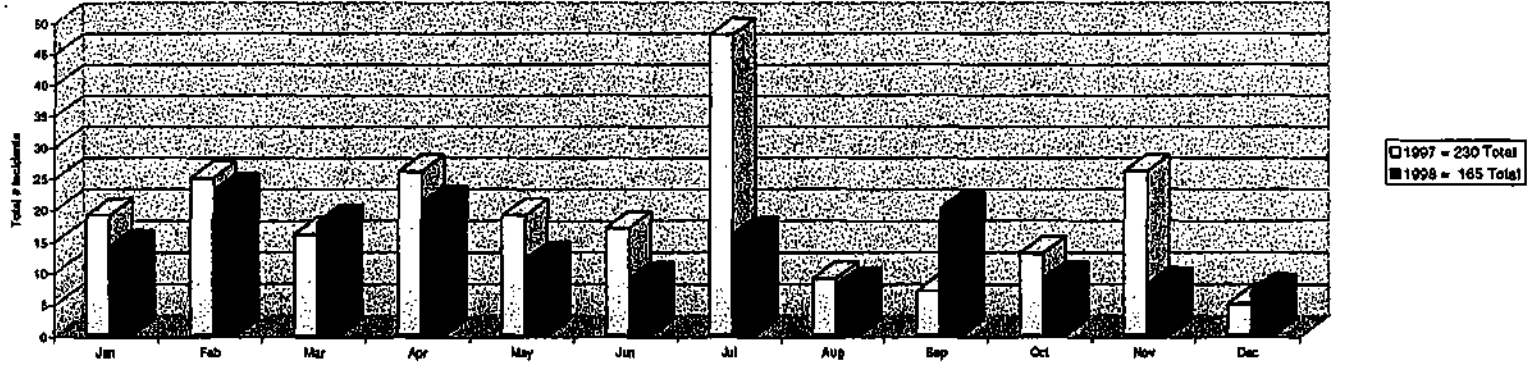
# Breakdown of Crime Activity

1997 vs. 1998

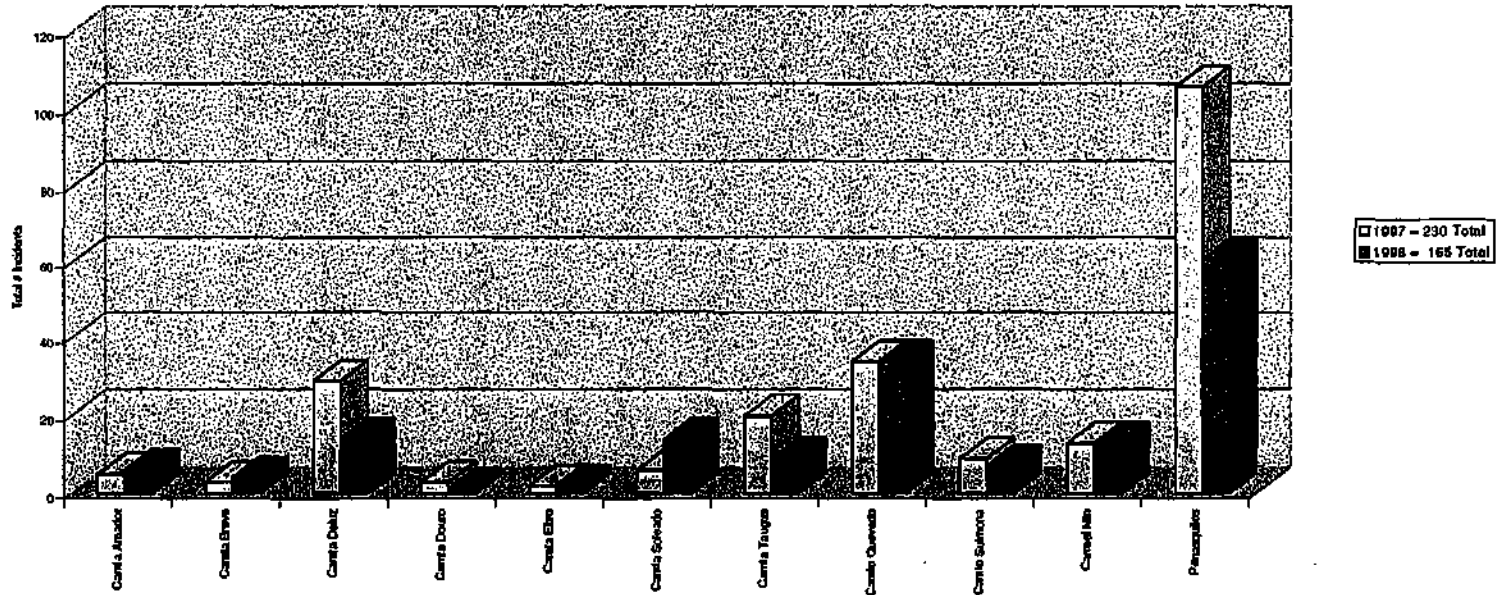
Area Within Census Tract 170.18



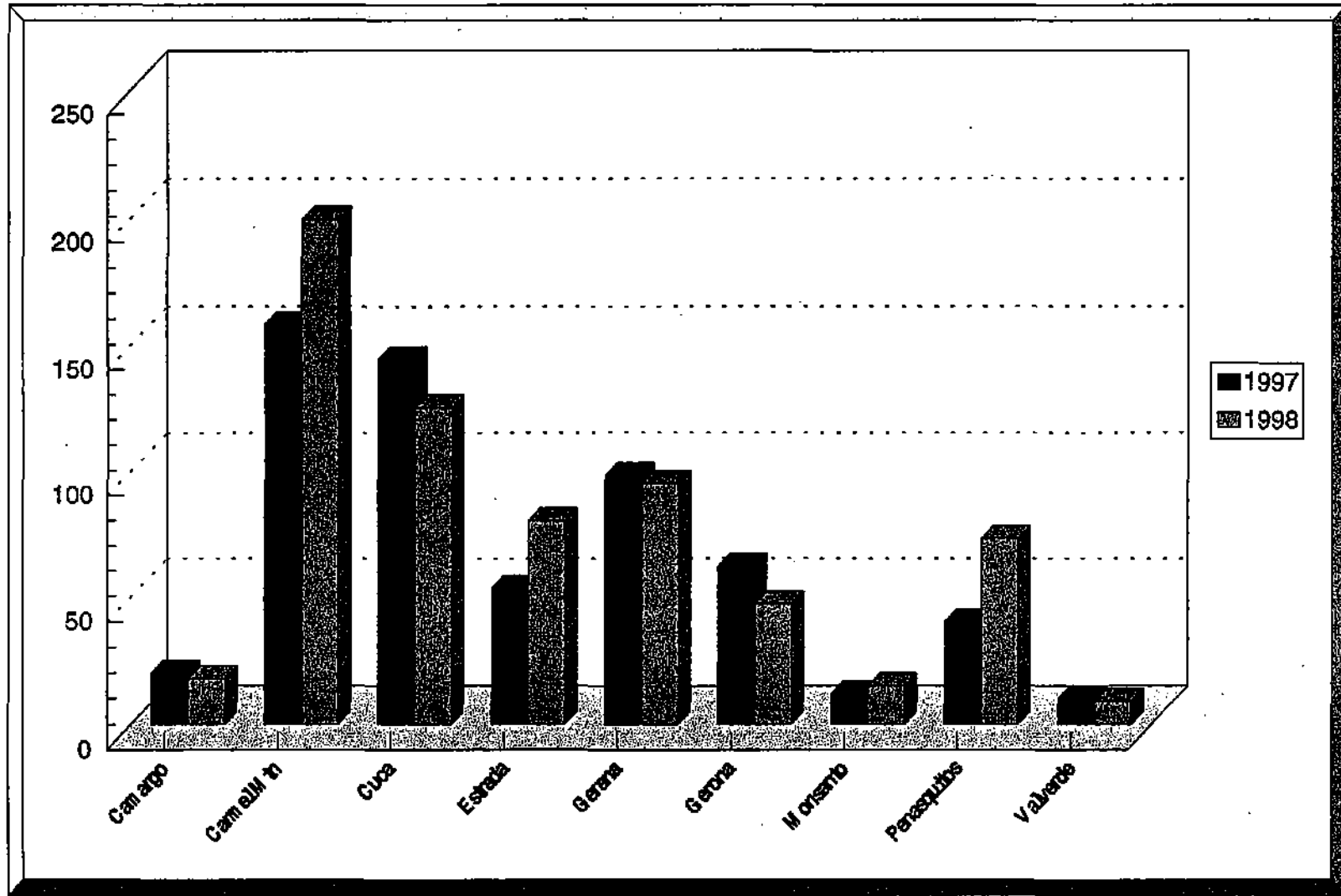
**Arrests, Crime Cases, Field Interviews, Juvenile Contacts Combined  
By Month 1997 vs. 1998  
Area Within Census Tract 170.18**



**Arrests, Crime Cases, Field Interviews, Juvenile Contacts Combined  
By Street 1997 vs. 1998  
Area Within Census Tract 170.18**



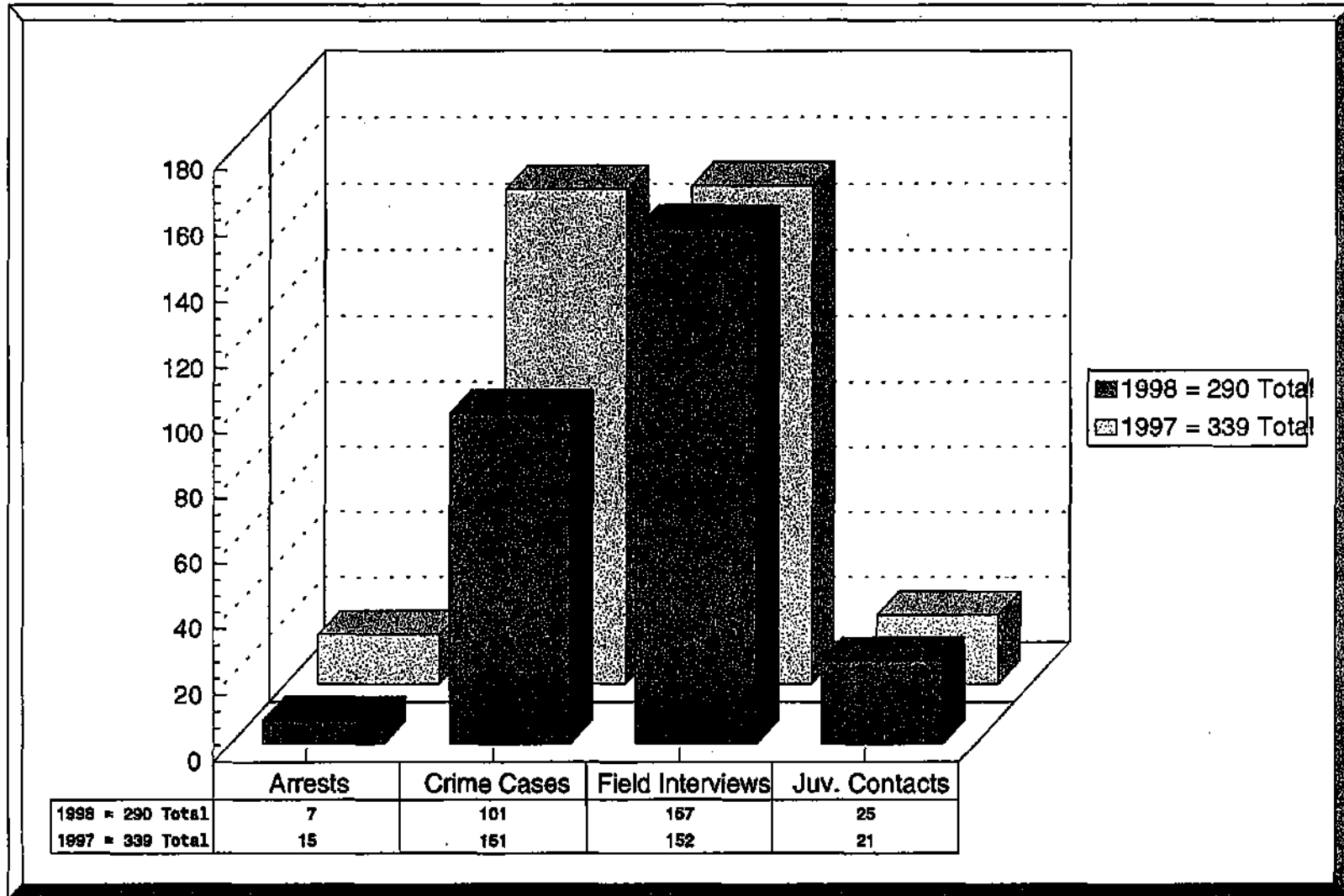
# Calls for Service By Street (within Census Tract 170.27) 1997 vs. 1998



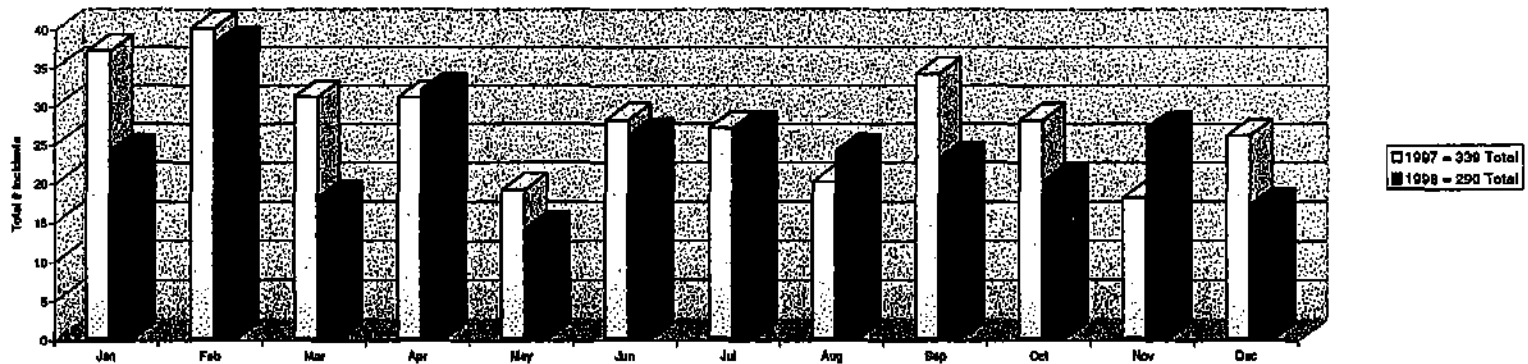
# Breakdown of Crime Activity

1997 vs. 1998

Area Within Census Tract 170.27



Arrests, Crime Cases, Field Interviews, Juvenile Contacts Combined  
By Month 1997 vs. 1998  
Area Within Census Tract 170.27



Arrests, Crime Cases, Field Interviews, Juvenile Contacts Combined  
By Street 1997 vs. 1998  
Area Within Census Tract 170.27

