

**SAN DIEGO
POLICE DEPARTMENT**

DRAG-NET UNIT

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

Project Summary:

Drag-Net

San Diego Police Department

The Problem:

Illegal motor vehicle speed contests, commonly known as street races, throughout the City of San Diego.

Analysis:

Officers developed a knowledge of the street-racing culture through undercover investigations, interviews with officers who had experience dealing with racers, monitoring Internet websites, interviewing racers, and exploring the legal alternatives that are available. Officers studied data on calls for service, traffic collisions, arrests, and citations related to illegal speed contests. Officers established baseline figures to determine the size of the problem. They identified collateral crimes that were occurring because of the problem. The officers set goals of reducing incidents of street racing to a level that it could be managed with existing resources and to reduce the number of illegally modified vehicles on the roadways.

The most important analysis the officers made was whether they could impact the problem, despite its magnitude and history of indifference by society. They realized they had to change society's paradigm about street racing. The Drag-Net Officers decided they would only be successful if they truly made San Diego a safer place. They knew lives could be saved if their analysis was accurate, and the response was effective.

Response:

Officers used a multi-faceted approach in a comprehensive response strategy:

- Undercover operations to identify, apprehend, and prosecute racers
- Undercover investigations of businesses that support street-racing
- Increased enforcement of existing laws
- Legislation to create new laws
- Partnership with other law enforcement agencies to improve information exchange
- Media advocacy to improve public awareness of the problem
- Partnership with civilian agency for high school education program
- Development of a law enforcement training program
- Partnership with insurance industry to reduce racer related insurance fraud
- Partnership with Bureau of Automotive Repair to increase officers' level of expertise
- Traffic engineering improvements to make race locations less conducive to racing
- Endorsement of legal alternatives to street-racing
- Partnership with prosecuting agencies to ensure uniform and consistent prosecutions
- Establish moderated forums on Internet websites that target street racers
- Monitor the Internet websites to stay abreast of the changing culture of street racing

Assessment:

The Drag-Net Project is ongoing. The analysis phase is also ongoing, however, many of the responses have already been evaluated and their successes measured:

- 89% reduction in instances of illegal speed contests in the City of San Diego
- 1200% increase in citations for illegal motor and emissions modifications
- 106 people arrested for engaging in illegal motor vehicle speed contests
- 828 law enforcement officers trained in vehicle modification and racing enforcement
- 283 insurance investigators trained in illegal vehicle modifications recognition
- Increased public awareness of the problem through media advocacy
- Improved education program at high school level
- Passage of law making it illegal to be a spectator at an illegal speed contest
- Passage of law permitting forfeiture of vehicle involved in illegal speed contest
- Increased awareness and enforcement by agencies throughout the region to avoid displacement
- Exchange of information and interaction with street racers through moderated forums on Internet websites
- Both goals of the project were met

Most importantly, the officers assessed whether their efforts had improved the quality of life in San Diego, and if they had prevented needless tragedy. During the project, the officers investigated several fatal traffic collisions that resulted from illegal speed contests. Two of those collisions involved multiple fatalities. The Drag-Net Officers worked with the surviving family members of the victims to direct their concerns to legislators, and toward improved public awareness of the problem. The officers were satisfied that they had indeed improved the quality of life in San Diego. The Drag-Net Officers believe that deaths resulting from street racing collisions are preventable and can be stopped. The officers were very successful in achieving their goals, but they knew there was still work to be done, and that work continues today, through the efforts of the Drag-Net Team, the community, and the media.



Project Name:

Drag-Net
San Diego Police Department

Scanning:

The City of San Diego is the second most populated city in California and the seventh in the United States. There are over 400 square miles within the City of San Diego, and more than 2500 miles of surface streets in the city. The City of San Diego has a population of 1.3 million. The population is 25% Hispanic, 11% Asian or Pacific Islander, 7% Afro-American and 57% are other, to include Caucasian.¹ There are more than 1.1 million vehicles registered in the City of San Diego and licensed drivers total nearly 850,000.²

Late at night, groups of young people gathered at various locations throughout the City of San Diego and raced their cars on city streets, often with deadly results. The impact of this problem on the community was tremendous. The frequency of citizen complaints was increasing steadily. There was a continual rise in the incidence of vandalism, violence, and collision related injuries and deaths at the street-racing events. This problem became so large that a task force was formed to find a solution. The task force, consisting of police officers, prosecutors, community members, and health care professionals identified this problem through complaints from citizens, calls for service, and observations of patrol officers.

"Illegal motor vehicle speed contest" was the crime type used at the initial level of diagnosis. However, it quickly became apparent there were a number of other crimes associated with the activity.

¹ Source: U.S. Census Bureau

² Source: California Dept. of Motor Vehicles

Analysis:

A variety of information sources were used to analyze the problem, including observations and investigations by undercover officers, observations and experience of patrol officers, complaints from citizens and business owners, crime analysis information, and calls for service. Officers also discovered a tremendous amount of information was available on the numerous Internet websites that cater to the street-racing culture. During the analysis of this problem, officers encountered some difficulty in finding accurate documentation of the history of the problem. They found that because of the way incidents are formatted in police computer databases, it was nearly impossible to distinguish which incidents involved street racing. The officers had to rely on information from media sources, and officers' memories to research the history of the problem.

Illegal motor vehicle speed contests have actually been occurring since the invention of the automobile. Man's "need for speed" and the desire to compete and test the limits of human and mechanical ability has been documented in history and glamorized in Hollywood³. In the past decade, the problem steadily increased to near epidemic proportions. A decade ago, illegal racing was occurring on weekend nights. Quickly, the popularity grew and races were held every day of the week, at all hours. However, Friday and Saturday nights were identified as having the greatest potential for the occurrences with the largest number of participants.

³ Source: San Diego Historical Society

Several victims of this problem were identified. Business owners at the locations frequented by the racers were identified because they were experiencing vandalism to their property. Large groups of people gathered to watch or participate in the races. Those people littered, damaged landscape and buildings, and urinated on the victim's property. The business owners had to routinely repair the damage or clean up the litter left behind after a weekend of racing. Traffic collisions resulting from the illegal races often damaged both public and private property. The motoring public was victimized while trying to use the roadways where the racers gathered. Oftentimes, these victims were caught in the traffic jam created by the crowds and cars waiting to race. As the frequency of illegal races increased, so did calls for service. As a result, citizens, who had a reasonable expectation of a timely response by officers serving their neighborhoods, were neglected. The calls for service to deal with the racing problem were taking patrol officers out of service for longer periods of time more frequently. Officers discovered there were collateral crimes connected with the street-racing culture, including auto theft and insurance fraud.⁴ This revelation highlighted insurance companies as an additional group of victims because they processed an increasing number of claims and paid out millions of dollars in losses.

Offenders were identified as a very diverse group by ethnicity, gender and age. The predominant group was found to be males from 20 to 24 years of age. Ethnic make-up mirrored the demographics of San Diego. Many of the offenders were present to engage in illegal speed contests, while others were there to watch and encourage the illegal activity. Their motivation was acceptance by peers, the "bragging rights" of winning a race, at times the financial gain of betting on a race, and the excitement of "getting away with something." Other offenders who

⁴ Source: National Insurance Crime Bureau

played a peripheral role were identified as businesses that sell and install performance modification parts that are not legal for use on public highways. Officers also identified people in the emissions testing industry who issued fraudulent emission certificates for the illegally modified vehicles used by the racers. The motivation for both of these groups was financial gain through sales of parts and services, and the "black market" price of fraudulent smog certificates.

The resultant harm from illegal speed contests was staggering. During the 120 day period of July 1998 to October 1998, there were an astounding eight deaths and 11 injuries directly related to street racing in San Diego County.⁵ Due to problems with reporting methods, it was difficult to determine with any accuracy the number of deaths and injuries in recent years. Officers researched data and determined that in 2002, there were eight deaths and 16 injuries related to street racing collisions in the City of San Diego. There were six deaths and 15 injuries throughout the rest of San Diego County during 2002. Property damage repair costs incurred by private businesses has risen proportionately with the popularity in street racing, but no factual data was available to determine an exact dollar amount.

Prior to the beginning of the responses used in this project, enforcement of illegal street racing had been sporadic, dedicated enforcement efforts. That enforcement usually consisted of three to five officers assigned to monitor typical pre-race congregation areas and illegal street-racing sites. Those officers issued citations, impounded vehicles for illegal speed contests and equipment violations, and made arrests when warranted. It was clear, the enforcement activity was ineffective since the activity continued, and, in fact, increased in frequency and numbers of participants. An unforeseen discovery was that many police officers had little or no knowledge

³ Source: San Diego State University Race Legal Foundation

about the racing culture or the appropriate enforcement action needed when encountering racing or modified cars. This lack of training and experience contributed to the sporadic, inconsistent, and ineffective enforcement efforts in the past.

Several issues were identified as causation factors of this growing problem. The young participants often spoke of:

- The excitement that surrounded the loosely organized events
- The thrill of competition
- "Something to do" on any given night
- The low risk of being apprehended
- The unfamiliarity of any community-based, legally organized, track-racing venues

Undercover officers infiltrated the world of street racers by attending illegal races, mingling in the crowds, videotaping the events, and talking with the participants. The officers found that the problem involved people from all socio-economic areas. They traveled from all areas of San Diego County to watch and participate in the races. The participants consisted more of spectators than actual racers. It became clear to the officers that a motivating factor for the racers was the presence and reaction of the spectators. On one particular Saturday night, undercover officers counted the cars at one of the most popular race sites. The officers were amazed when they found there were nearly 1200 cars, each with an average of two to three occupants, at the race site.

Officers interviewed jurors at the conclusion of several court trials for illegal speed contests. It was estimated the jurors were a representative cross-section of the community. Some of the jurors stated they had difficulty believing the descriptions the testifying officers gave of the races, and even the videotape of the activity. They said it was unbelievable that such activity was taking place in their community. It became evident that many members of the community were unaware of the extent of the racing problem.

Response:

The officers knew they needed to find new and innovative responses to the racing issue since previous efforts to address the problem had been unsuccessful. The San Diego Police Department applied for and received a grant from the California Office of Traffic Safety. Consequently, The Police Department formed The Drag-Net Team, a full-time unit specially designed to address the racing problem. The San Diego Police Department was the first law enforcement agency in the world to dedicate a full-time unit to combat street racing. A Sergeant was chosen to supervise the project, and given the flexibility to choose his officers. The Sergeant selected officers based on their diverse backgrounds and experience. He wanted them to be able to disagree with one another, thereby creating an environment of growth and brainstorming needed for problem solving. They were selected for their ability to "think as far outside the box as possible." The team decided that the parameters of their response alternatives were that they had to be legal, ethical, and within department policies and procedures. The officers considered a wide variety of response alternatives, including:

- Undercover operations to identify and prosecute racers
- Education programs at the high school level

- Development of a training program for law enforcement officers
- Increased enforcement of existing laws
- Legislation to create new laws
- Media advocacy to improve public awareness of the problem
- Partnership with other law enforcement agencies to improve information exchange
- Partnership with The Bureau of Automotive Repair to improve officers' expertise
- Partnership with the insurance industry to reduce insurance fraud
- Undercover investigations of businesses that support street racing
- Traffic engineering improvements to make popular locations less conducive to racing
- Endorsement of community-based, legal, track alternatives to street racing
- Partnership with prosecuting agencies to ensure uniform and consistent prosecutions
- Moderated forums on Internet websites that target street racers
- Monitoring the Internet websites to stay abreast of the changing culture of street racing

The officers decided not to limit themselves to a specific number of response alternatives. They believed the severity of the problem dictated that any alternative was worth exploring to reduce the loss of life, and to decrease property damage. Each of the response alternatives shown above was used successfully.

Officers conducted numerous undercover investigations at illegal races. The officers infiltrated the large crowds at the races and obtained evidence to identify those people who were racing. The officers then submitted reports and had arrest warrants issued by a judge, charging the individual racers with appropriate criminal offenses. The Drag-Net Team conducted

"warrant sweeps". These sweeps involved teams of uniformed officers serving arrest warrants at the suspect's homes early on weekend mornings. The racer's cars were impounded and held for 30 days in accordance with the California Vehicle Code. The sweeps were widely reported by the news media, resulting a sense of paranoia in the street racing community. Racers began to fear arrest, since now they didn't know if undercover officers were in the crowd, watching. On three occasions, undercover officers watched races and identified the people actively racing. At a designated signal, a pre-assembled group of officers in marked police cars converged on the race site and blocked the street. As the vehicles inside the "block-in" were released through an exit point, the undercover officers pointed out the people they had seen racing and those drivers were immediately arrested and their cars impounded. A letter was sent to the registered owner of each car exiting the operation telling them where their car had been and what activity had occurred. This brought many unsuspecting parents to the realization that their cars and children had been at the street races, increasing public awareness of the problem.

Officers worked with representatives from the California Bureau of Automotive Repair to develop a comprehensive training program for law enforcement officers and insurance investigators. Between March 2002, and April 2003, the officers and bureau representatives have trained 828 law enforcement officers and 283 insurance investigators in identification and enforcement of illegally modified vehicles, street racing trends and enforcement, and auto theft investigations. The training provided to law enforcement officers resulted in increases in arrests for street racing and citations for illegal engine modifications. Traffic collisions resulting from street races are now reported more accurately due to the increased awareness by the newly

trained officers. Traffic collisions previously reported as having been caused by unsafe speed are now being investigated and reported as involving street racing.

Drag-Net officers worked with the San Diego City Attorney's Office to create two new city ordinances. One ordinance makes it a misdemeanor crime to be a spectator at an illegal motor vehicle speed contest or exhibition of speed. The other allows for the seizure, forfeiture, and sale of a car used in an illegal motor vehicle speed contest when the driver meets the criteria of having certain prior criminal convictions. The officers also worked with legislative representatives to support legislation at the State level to increase penalties for certain street racing offenses.

The officers worked with the Bureau of Automotive Repair to serve search warrants resulting from undercover investigations at smog inspection businesses that were found to be issuing fraudulent smog certificates to street racers.

Drag-Net officers supported the efforts of the San Diego State University Race Legal Foundation and their legal track-racing alternative to street racing. The officers worked with a representative from the foundation who conducts presentations about the dangers of street racing at high schools throughout San Diego County. People arrested during street racing warrant sweeps were given passes to race at legal races operated by The Race Legal Foundation.

The officers established liaisons with every law enforcement agency in San Diego County, which resulted in an excellent exchange of information, and helped the problem of displacement.

The officers worked with local, national, and international media to increase public awareness of the problem of street racing. Several national networks featured stories about street racing and highlighted the Drag-Net Team in their stories.

Drag-Net officers established moderated forums on several Internet websites. There was an open exchange of questions and answers between racers and officers. The forums created the opportunity for all participants to better understand each others concerns and perspective. The officers regularly monitored the various websites for updates in trends and intelligence gathering.

The response was developed using all the information obtained in the analysis. As the analysis was conducted, it became apparent that the core problem was multi-faceted. Officers designed the response to address each of those issues along with the core problem of illegal speed contests. Officers believed legal and ethical considerations were paramount in contemplating response alternatives. The grant they received along with funding from the Police Department was adequate to cover the costs of equipment and supplies.

The project goal was to reduce the incidence of street racing to a manageable, patrol-resource level. The measurable objectives were the number of people participating in, or spectating at,

street races. The officers also set a goal of reducing the number of illegally modified cars on the road, since there was a direct connection between these cars and street racing.

The resources available to implement the response plan were:

- Deputy City Attorney assigned to prosecute all cases generated by the project
- San Diego State University Race Legal Program as a legal, track-racing alternative
- San Diego State University Race Legal Program representative to conduct high school presentations
- Representatives from California Bureau of Automotive Repair to team with Drag-Net officers to conduct training for law enforcement officers and insurance investigators
- Special investigator from the National Insurance Crime Bureau as a resource and liaison on insurance related crimes
- Internet websites as an intelligence resource on street racing trends
- Internet websites to allow for a moderated forum for exchange of information between officers and racers

The difficulties encountered by the officers in implementing the response were:

- Discrepancy between perceived and actual knowledge of street racing by officers
- Officers initially lacked adequate equipment to effectively implement the response
- Officers encountered staffing shortages for large scale operations
- Street racers became aware of the tactics of the officers, so it became more difficult to infiltrate the crowds

- Due to conflicts within the California Bureau of Automotive Repair, the representatives who were working on the project were forced to withdraw

Assessment:

This problem is being evaluated on an ongoing basis. The Drag-Net Team is still in operation within the San Diego Police Department. The success of this project far exceeded the initial expectations of the officers. The results were evaluated by comparing arrest and citation statistics, calls for service, and citizen complaints about the problem. The officers also relied on information from patrol officers, their own observations, and information on Internet websites.

The assessment yielded the following:

- 89% reduction in the instances of street racing in the City of San Diego
- 1200% increase in citations for illegal motor and emissions modifications
- 106 people arrested for engaging in illegal motor vehicle speed contests
- 828 law enforcement officers throughout Southern California trained in illegal vehicle modifications and racing enforcement
- 283 insurance investigators trained in illegal vehicle modifications recognition
- Attendance at legal, track-racing venues has increased dramatically since the implementation of the response
- Patrol officers report fewer than 10 cars at traditional pre-race gathering locations
- New legislation making it illegal to be a spectator at an illegal speed contest
- New legislation permitting forfeiture and sale of vehicles involved in illegal speed contests when the driver meets certain criteria with prior criminal convictions

- Improved investigation and reporting of traffic collisions involving street racing
- New procedures established within the police department databases to document street racing incidents
- Intelligence gathered from Internet websites indicates many street racers have stopped racing because of the fear of arrest, the lack of spectators due to the newly enacted laws, and the threat of their cars being forfeited and sold.

The data that supported the conclusions of the assessment came from:

- Crime Analysis information on arrests, citations, and calls for service
- Training rosters
- Internet websites
- Change in procedures for computer formatting of incidents involving street racing
- Observations of patrol officers
- Observations of undercover officers

There is some indication that the problem was displaced to other areas of the County. However, intelligence from other law enforcement agencies confirms that the problem is intermittent, easily managed with existing resources, and the number of participants is usually less than 20 people.

The response will require periodic monitoring since it is believed that approximately 10% of those involved in street racing will continue to race and will not take advantage of legal track-racing alternatives.⁶

⁶ Source: San Diego State University Race Legal Foundation

Reference List:

- Internet Websites
- National Insurance Crime Bureau
- San Diego Historical Society
- San Diego State University Race Legal Foundation
- San Diego Union-Tribune Newspaper

Agency and Officer Information:

This problem was identified at the management level of the Police Department. Management personnel formed a task force to study the problem. Once the task force made its recommendations, a sergeant and four officers adopted the problem solving-initiative. The San Diego Police Department has widely adopted problem solving techniques, so each officer involved in this project had received special training in problem-oriented policing and problem-solving. There were no special incentives given to any of the officers involved in this problem-solving project.

The grant received by the San Diego Police Department from the California Office of Traffic Safety provided equipment for the team. A portion of the grant money was used to offset salary costs, and a portion was used for training. When the officers started working on this project, none of the equipment purchased through the grant had been received, so the officers used their own personal camera and computer equipment.

Conclusion:

Officers identified a serious, and often deadly problem that was affecting the quality of life in San Diego. They thoroughly analyzed the problem, and even though there was very little documented historical data available, they identified all information necessary to formulate a comprehensive response. Drag-Net officers instituted their response plan, going so far as to use their own personal equipment to ensure their success. The response was legal, ethical, and far more effective than anyone ever imagined possible. San Diego has been made safer because of the problem-solving techniques used by the officers. There is a renewed commitment to solving this problem throughout the community because of the success of the Drag-Net Team.

Contact Information:

Sergeant Greg Sloan

9265 Aero Dr.

San Diego, Calif. 92123

Office: (858) 495-7833

Fax: (858) 495-7862

Officer Randy Hill

9265 Aero Dr.

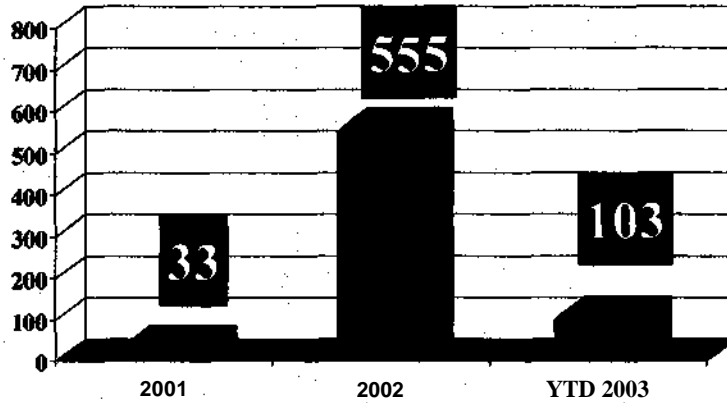
San Diego, Calif. 92123

Office: (858) 573-5094

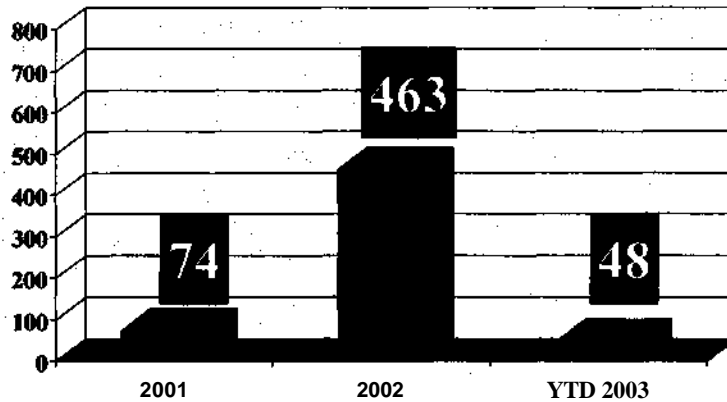
Fax: (858) 495-7862



Illegal Engine Modification Citations - CA Highway Patrol (within S.D. County)



Illegal Engine Modification Citations - San Diego Police Department



Street drag racing leads to sweep by local police

Team arrests 8, impounds seven cars during operation

By Terry Rodgers
STAFF WRITER

Hoping to put the skids to a dangerous apastime^an Diego police yesterday served arrest warrants on young adults suspected of participating in illegal street drag racing. JK£: They?were hauled out of bed in the early fe^morning, handcuffed and escorted to patrol cars as their shocked and often embarrassed 7- parents watched and alarmed neighbors peeked from behind drawn curtains. • • •

Welcome to Operation Wake Up Can, the latest-attempt by authorities to put a dent in youths' enthusiasm to be as cool behind the wheel as James Dean or Richard Petty.

Moving quickly before 7 a.m., a special operations team involving a dozen officers scattered across the county from National City to Ocean-side in search of 20 drag-racing suspects. They netted eight arrests and impounded seven vehicles. The warrants remain active on the others, who could be arrested in future sweeps.

Those targeted by the operation ran the gamut from repeat offenders to first-time arrestees, police said. One of those picked up yesterday is charged with acting as the starter for the dragsters and faces 89 counts of acting as an accomplice for his participation in the races. N

For the alleged perpetrators, the cost for bail, court-imposed fines and storage fees to reclaim their vehicles typically totals \$5,000 by the time it's all over, police said.

HOne father clad in only his slippers and underwear was surprised and humiliated when he realized his son's arrest was being captured on videotape for a local television station.

"Jeez, it's like we're Public Enemy No. 1 here," said Richard Perry. "This is crazy. My son has never even gotten a ticket before."

Later, he admitted he has been concerned about the company his son has been keeping.

"I didn't think he'd be doing something stupid like street racing," Perry said.

The beleaguered dad from Clairemont cooperated fully with police. He voluntarily backed his son's souped-up, pearl-white Honda Accord

SEE Street racing, B3



San Diego police Officers Robert Hawkins (left) and Steven Bourasa arrested Jason King, 20, in front of his home in Linda Vista early yesterday morning during a sweep against suspected street drag racers... Sandy Huffaker

• STREET RACING CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1 /•Latetnight craze on the rise, says police sergeant

out of the garage so police could tow it away. The car will sit in the storage yard for a minimum of 30 days, accumulating daily impound fees.

Asked how he will explain his arrest to his father, John R. Perry, 23, professed his innocence. "I don't even race, so he won't care," he said.

But the message police wish to deliver is as black and white as their patrol cars: Go drag racing today, and you might get dragged away to jail tomorrow.

The crackdown on street drag racing is just beginning and will continue to unfold as police reap the results of ongoing undercover investigations from the newly formed Drag Net Unit, said Assistant Police Chief William A. Maheu.

He declined to describe the methods police may have used — such as hidden video cameras — to gather evidence against the alleged drag racers.

This sends a message that any time there's illegal drag racing out there, (police) are watching," he said.

The renewed emphasis is the result of a \$400,000 grant from the state Office of Traffic Safety earmarked, for enforcement against illegal drag racing, Maheu said.

Police said those arrested yesterday were offered a free pass to participate in a legal racing program at Qualcomm Stadium called Racelegal.com that is sponsored by San Diego State University.

The popularity of late-night racing is a problem that is increasing locally and nationwide, said San Diego police Sgt Greg Sloan.

Sloan said San Diego is one of the state's largest hotbeds for hot-rodding, adding that it also is reaching epidemic proportions in San Jose, Riverside and Ontario.

During one two-month period in 1998, eight people in the county died as a result of street-racing crashes, he said. Police

could not cite any local deaths or injuries since then.

"We're trying to prevent a catastrophe," Sloan said.

Popular spots for illegal racing include Kearny Villa Road near state Route 163, Via Rancho Parkway outside Escondido and Sorrento Valley Road near Camel Valley, police said.

The biggest impromptu car rallies have involved up to 1,200 vehicles and a few thousand spectators, who typically cram into a straightaway portion of suburban highway to hold competitions.

They are basically driving over the feet of spectators out there," Sloan said.

Custom auto-parts shops that cater to street racers have increased from a couple in the 1970s to more than 500 county-wide today, he said.

In Linda Vista, overlooking Mission Bay, Officers Steven Bourasa and Robert Hawkins caught up with Jason King, 20, as he returned from work on the night shift at a discount store.

Tears filled the eyes of Jason's aunt as her nephew was led away to a patrol car while his neighbors watched.

Bourasa told her that she would have to find a way to raise \$2,500 bail to get her nephew out of jail. As for the car, it will remain impounded for at least a month, he said.

Jason's aunt, who identified herself only as Sandi, said using traditional hard-line, punitive police tactics won't change an illicit pastime that's generations old.

"Dying doesn't send a message to them," she said. "Getting arrested doesn't either. I don't know what will. These kids are in their own little world. It's their families and loved ones that sit home and cry."

"You can't just lock them all up. Street racing has been going on since Ford came out with the Model T."

As she spoke, a TV news crew focused its camera on a bumper sticker on Jason's souped-up Honda. It read, "Street Racing Is Against the Law."

Street-race suspects caught in Drag-Net

Police unit conducts county-wide sweep

By Norberto Santana Jr.
STAFF WRITER V

They went to breakfast and furious to have been cuffed and humiliated.

Illegal street racers were targeted yesterday as the San Diego Police Department's Drag-Net unit fended out across the county to serve warrants, on more than a dozen people at their homes.

Most of the violations were

for misdemeanor drag racing that was documented almost a year ago on videotape, and suspects seemed surprised by the early-morning knock on the door from officers.

"This is really for drag racing?" said Lakeside resident David Feathers, 21, as he was led cuffed to a police vehicle. Later, the oversize muffler on his modified Honda let out a loud screech, scraping the pavement as a tow truck pulled the car away.

In all, eight people were ar-

rested and five cars were impounded. In addition to a \$5,000 bail, a 30-day impound fee is charged along with a host of other smog-mandated repairs.

• RACING

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 61

Humiliation of violators is aim of police sweep

"Ifs gone this time," said Feathers' mother, Laurie, as she watched the Honda being towed. "I hate to think how much he's put into the car. I know it's thousands."

This is the third warrant sweep for illegal racing this year. More than 50 warrants have been served. On Wednesday, the police unit will accompany Chief David Bejarano before the San Diego City Council, which is considering an ordinance making it a crime to be a spectator or passenger in a car at a street race.

Detective Kerry Mensior, who heads the year-old Drag-Net unit, says it may be the only police unit of its kind in the nation. The unit is largely funded by a \$400,000 grant from the California Office of Traffic Safety.

Mensior said street racing is a problem that cries out for action. One-third of the city's 15 vehicular fatalities this year were caused by illegal street racing, he said, and across the county more than a dozen have been killed and 20 injured this year.

The five-man unit uses a variety of techniques, including videotaping and undercover agents, to target the drag-racing community mushrooming throughout San Diego County. The unit also trains insurance companies to identify racing-related accidents and vandalism, as well as how to track stolen engines and cars connected to illegal racing.

"Each operation we do a little differently," said police Detective John Austin, who works with the Drag-Net unit. Yesterday's operation was intended to publicly humiliate racers at their homes, in front of friends and family members.

"Whatever it takes to get these people to stop racing, that's what we'll do," Mensior

Phan Kin, 22, spent his Saturday trying to figure out how to bail out his older brother, Png, who was arrested during an early-morning sweep.

"They make it seem like he killed someone," Phan Kin said. "Ifs all for the publicity."

He admits racing is dangerous but says no one is trying to hurt anyone.

"It's just (he need for speed)," he said. "Ifs all about the image."

Drag-Net aims to craft another image for the racers: being handcuffed in front of their parents, friends and neighbors on weekend mornings, followed by a tow to the impound yard.

That was the scene in a quiet Santee neighborhood yesterday.

A red Acura with a shiny muffler and large tachometer was parked in the driveway. Inside, Dernel Sanchez, 20, was awakened by a polite knock on the door from Mensior.

After officers told Sanchez's father about his son's racing exploits, he was summoned from his room. While Sanchez sat in a chair in the living room, his father threw his son's shoes and socks at him, visibly angry over the unsettling sight of police vehicles in his front yard. Sanchez was later cuffed and taken into custody.

"You get arrested at 3 a.m. your parents might believe your story," Mensior said after speaking to Sanchez's parents. "But when we come out on a Saturday with a warrant, it's harder."

Mensior said the psychological impact of the Saturday morning warrant sweeps is clear. "You're going to be the talk of the neighborhood."

For some law-abiding adults, having police embarrass them in front of their neighbors may seem a bit too tough.

"Have the parents suffered some shame? They very well may have," Mensior said. "But we depend on the parents. Sometimes it takes what happens today for the light bulb to go on in the parents' mind."

That knock on the door is when some parents first realize why Junior is constantly buying new tires, or a transmission or an engine. It also explains the huge tachometer and gauges on the dashboard, as well as the trim Det-size muffler.

Illegal street racing & speeding cause concern in area

by Deanna Spehn

President, Tierrasanta Community Council

The Tierrasanta Community Council heard a special request by a local resident at its September 18th meeting to install speed humps and "bots dots" at the eastern end of Clairemont Mesa Blvd. in order to stop the illegal street racing, speeding and damage to the gate leading into Mission Trails Regional Park that has plagued the community for several years. The TCC and its various committees has discussed the problem on numerous occasions and has made requests to both the Police Department and the City Council to do a targeted enforcement of the speeding and illegal street racing in the community. We have also asked for the City to go after those drivers who can be identified as causing damage to the park's staging area so that our Open Space Maintenance Assessment District can be reimbursed for expenses in rebuilding the gate after each accident.

The City's Risk Management Department has been collecting for the damage when the drivers can be identified. However, the City's response to the requests to deal with the speeding and ongoing damage to the gate to Mission Trails Regional Park at the staging area is to install a flashing yellow light on Clairemont Mesa Blvd. just before Rueda Drive. That project is currently in design. The TCC has expressed concern that installing a flashing "beacon" will not be an effective deterrent.

According to the Tierrasanta resident who addressed the TCC, "My neighbors and I have reported the problem to the Satellite Police Office in Tierrasanta. I, for one, have on countless occasions reported to the San Diego Police when I hear the drag racing in progress. To the best of my knowledge, no tickets have been issued nor have there been any drag racers caught in the act. The drag race is over by the time one could call the Police and have a car dispatched. I've even kept a log to see if there is a pattern to the racing. There isn't a pattern; it can occur at any time, day or night. I

have asked for a review by the City Traffic & Engineering Department to install speed humps on that particular section of Clairemont Mesa Blvd. I believe that installing speed humps on Clairemont Mesa Blvd. westbound between the Staging Area for Mission Trails Regional Park and Rueda Drive would put an end to the problem, and may save some lives." The name of the resident is not being published because the Police stated at the TCC meeting that it is possible that retaliation may be possible by those involved in the illegal behavior.

According to the resident, "The park is a popular destination for walkers, hikers and mountain bike riders. We often have several bicyclists at the end of Clairemont Mesa Blvd. who are put in harm's way. To give just one example, on September 6th at 4:40 pm, a speeding car passed several of these bicyclists, crashed into a brick wall and totaled what was left of the steel entrance gate to MTRP. This gate was previously damaged from another accident prior to September 6, 2002. This gate has been replaced often, at the expense of Tierrasanta property owners through the Tierrasanta Open Space Maintenance District." The Police confirmed that the driver in the September 6th incident was arrested as a drunk driver and that cost recovery efforts are underway for the damage to the gate.

The proposed solution offered by the resident is to install speed humps on the westbound lanes from

the park entrance to Rueda Drive and install "dots" on the eastbound lanes from Rueda to the end of Clairemont Mesa Blvd. to caution drivers that the road comes to a dead end. This would solve both issues by 1) stopping illegal street racers who won't want to race over a few speed humps; and 2) alerting drivers that the road is about to end by using "dots" - a proven technology on our highways.

Some of the TCC members were concerned that the "dots" would cause noise that would impact the adjacent housing and wanted more information on their potential impact.

The City has a Dagnet Team, funded through a special State grant, that is trying to reduce the number of illegal street racing events. Police Officer Randy Hill from the Dagnet Team spoke at the TCC meeting on September 18th and said that while Tierrasanta has a problem, it is nowhere near the problem faced by other neighborhoods where as many as 1200 cars each with 2 to 3 passengers gather in the middle of the night for illegal street racing. According to Hill, one such location is on Kearny Villa Road just south of MCAS Miramar. Stepped up enforcement by the Police has reduced the number of people gathering for such events, but he also pointed out that in 2002 there have been 12 traffic related fatalities in the city, 5 of which

continued on page 3

STREET RACING, continued from page 2

were directly related to illegal street racing. In that same period there have been 6 additional deaths in the rest of the County due to illegal street racing.

Stepped up enforcement includes conducting emissions testing on the cars, usually resulting in \$2300 per car to bring them back into compliance with state laws. In the last year there have been 35 arrests for illegal street racing, according to Hill. The drivers lose their cars for one month following the arrest. It is a misdemeanor to be involved in an illegal street race. The usual fine for a first offense is \$960 with a mandatory \$200 to a restitution fund.

The problem with the Clairemont Mesa Blvd. incidents, according to the Police, is that by the time they are called and can get a car to the location, the violators are gone.

Local residents know that illegal speed racing is not confined to the east end of Clairemont Mesa Blvd. It takes place along Clairemont Mesa Blvd. at several locations and has caused property damage to homes in the past. There have also been incidents on Via Valarta and Tierrasanta Blvd. In Tierrasanta's 30+ years of existence, we have lost too many people due to speeding on our streets.

The Tierrasanta Community Council once again asked the Police and City Councilmember Jim Madaffer, who was present at the meeting on September 18th, to please take action to stop the illegal street racing and speeding on Clairemont Mesa Blvd., and to pursue efforts to install road humps and investigate the use of "dots" to discourage such activity.

The Tierrasanta Community Council is the officially recognized planning group for the community, and meets the third Wednesday of each month at 7 pm at the Tierrasanta Recreation Center, 11220 Clairemont Mesa Blvd. The community is encouraged to attend.

targets watchers of illegal drag races

Spectators could face jail or fines;

By Ray Huard
STAFF WRITER

Spectators at illegal street races could be arrested and jailed for up to six months or fined up to \$1,000 under a proposed law adopted in a preliminary vote yesterday by the San Diego City Council.

"Street racers are criminals who are risking the lives of San Diegans, and spectators are aiding and abetting that activity," said Mayor Dick Murphy.

A final vote on the measure is expected next week, and City Attorney Casey Gwinn said it could take effect immediately if it is passed as an emergency measure.

The council's unanimous vote on the proposed law yesterday comes a little more than a week after two 19-year-old El Cajon youths were killed on Imperial Avenue in San Diego when the compact car they were riding in was struck by an illegal street racer. The driver of one of the two street-racing cars involved in the incident has been arrested and charged with two counts of second-degree murder.

"The people who are doing this are sick; it's just sick to go out on the street," Councilman George Stevens said of the illegal racing.

So far this year, seven people have been killed within the city of San Diego from illegal street racing, and 15 people have been killed countywide, said assistant police Chief William Maheu.

"The illegal street racers have made the streets of San Diego unsafe for all of us because of their criminal activity," said Gwinn, who championed the proposal to make it illegal to attend street races.

Gwinn said the city and county of Los Angeles and the city of Ontario have enacted similar laws making it illegal to attend street races.

Former street racer Jeff Milton of Poway said making it a crime to attend street races would lessen the incentive to race on city streets because there would be fewer people cheering the racers.

That is why a lot of the racers race, to show off their cars—"Hey, look at me, I'm cool," Milton said.

Some parents whose children have died as a result of illegal street racing said the city must do whatever it can to get racers off city streets and provide legal locations for them to race.

"I just wonder why something wasn't done about this sooner," said Peggy Klein-Martinez, whose 17-year-old daughter was killed in an illegal street race earlier this year. She said the proposed law, against attending such races, is a tool that the city can use to stop

•RACES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1

Legal venues are needed, council says

those street races, and we don't have to lose any more children like my daughter.

Aside from the direct risk other motorists face from street racers, city firefighter/paramedic Carrie Fisher said racers often block the entrance to a fire station on Carroll Canyon Road in Sorrento Valley.

Byron Wear

SB.B3SE

said the city must work to provide legal alternatives to street racing. Currently, legal races are

the Qualcomm Stadium Peking lot under the legal.com name.

Councilwoman Donna Frye said she doesn't want to misread the city's search for legal sites as condoning illegal races.

"I do not believe a look at legal venue condones illegal activity," Frye said. "It's not acceptable to

KSJ Sf

From zero to splat

Crack down hard on street racing

Why do some people seem to forget a car is for transportation?

Instead, especially for young people, their cars are their most important possessions, their main toy, a status symbol, the answer to an identity crisis and the favorite form of recreation.

Some young people get jobs just so they can spend thousands of dollars tricking out their cars, from Honda Civics to Ford Mustangs. Specialty shops and Internet retailers can help customize a compact to become street killing machines, just like in that cool movie, "The Fast and the Furious." Only, those were actors and stuntmen. Nobody really died in that movie, not like on the streets of San Diego.

So far, more than a dozen people have died in street racing in San Diego County this year. This problem has become an epidemic.

Government is responding. The San Diego Police Department created a special unit that often works undercover and has impounded 75 cars and issued 350 citations for illegal engine modifications. An arrest for racing can cost about \$10,000, once fines, bail, impound fees and other charges are added. An illegal racer's car can be impounded for 30 days.

Meanwhile, Gov. Gray Davis signed a law expanding the police's ability to impound cars. Pre-

viously, it had to be proven drivers were actually involved in a race. Under the new law, cars can be impounded for reckless driving, or the "exhibition of speed." Cops won't have to prove that an actual contest was under way.

However, we wonder if impounding a car for only 30 days is enough of a deterrent. Six months for a first offense sounds better. And for a second offense, how about dismantling the car and selling it for scrap?

Are those unreasonable punishments? Ask the families of Shanna Jump and Brian Hanson, two 19-year-old innocents killed by a street racer on Oct. 6.

Some argue that street racing has been around in Southern California for as long as cars. Imperial Avenue is one age-old racing strip in this town. It's also where Jump and Hanson died.

That people have been doing something stupid for a long time doesn't make it any less stupid. This is one social evil that can be cured by some good old-fashioned law and order.

We don't really need to offer kids a safe alternative, such as legal places to race their machines. Tougher penalties, stricter enforcement and quicker and longer impounds of vehicles will put a big dent in street racing. The racers can think about something better to do with their lives while riding the bus.