RETAIL DISTRICT CRIME REDUCTION PLAN:
CHANGING THE CRIMINAL PERCEPTION

Arlington Police Department

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Summary

Problem

The City of Arlington, Texas has a large retail and service industry area in the southern portion of the center. The area saw a large increase in construction from 2006 to 2009. The increasing number of businesses attracted more consumers and visitors to the area. Unfortunately, the popularity of the retail district also attracted individuals with intent to commit criminal activity. As a result, the retail district saw a 55% increase in crime from 2006 to 2009, with large increases in vehicle burglaries, retail thefts, and motor vehicle thefts. The impact on the rising crime led to citizen perceptions of a crime problem in the area. Since the city of Arlington relies a great deal on sales tax revenue, the impact on citizen’s not visiting the area would have a detrimental impact on revenue used for all other city functions.

Analysis

There were numerous reviews of available crime data used. Data from previous calls in the area, officer activity, and citizen and business complaints were reviewed at multiple levels within the police department. Input from business leaders in the area was sought to identify their perception of the problem. During the analysis phase, it was apparent that a key contributor to the problem of rising crime was the criminal perception that offenses could be committed in the area without risk of being caught.
Response

In the immediate response, a focus was placed on the gathering of intelligence on the suspects in the area. This intelligence was later used to accurately predict time, place, and perpetrators of crimes. Business partnerships were redesigned with specific focus on the quick exchange of information. All of this data allowed increased officer self initiated contacts in the identified target/problem areas within the retail district. The focused responses were coordinated to change the criminal perception that the area was an easy target.

Assessment

The goal of the program was to see long term crime reductions in the retail district. From 2010 through 2012, the retail district saw a decrease in crime of 43%. The area now has the lowest crime it has had since 2005. The area is vibrant and growing, and Arlington continues to benefit from a strong retail environment.

Scanning

The area in Arlington identified as the South Retail District borders several major roadways in the city, including Interstate 20. The area is known as a shopping destination for the city’s nearly 400,000 residents, as well as the millions of residents throughout the Dallas-Ft. Worth metroplex. The central attraction to the area is the Parks Mall at Arlington. This is a large enclosed mall that attracts 25 million visitors each year. Beginning in 2005, the area saw a rapid increase in new businesses. A new
outdoor mall was constructed that brought in over 100 new businesses. In addition, several new hotels, banks and a medical complex were developed in the area. Sales tax revenues from businesses within the retail district are key to the city’s ability to fund services for citizens.

A detailed analysis of retail district crime trends conducted at the end of 2009 indicated that the rise in the number of visitors had led to steady increases in crime. The area had an increase of 55% in crime from 2006 to 2009. This alarming increase adversely affected citizen perceptions of safety in the area. Business leaders in the area increasingly voiced frustration over customers being victimized. Closer analysis of statistics showed an increase of 72% in vehicle burglaries and 67% in auto theft. These crimes directly impacted consumer perceptions. Businesses also experienced increased victimization with a 48% increase in shoplifting/theft cases. (See appendices, Figure 1)

**Analysis**

The first step towards stopping the increasing crime trend and then reversing it was a thorough analysis of the problem and its underlying causes. Managers in the police department resisted the urge to proceed rapidly through the analysis of the problem in order to immediately address it. It was understood that a long term solution was the ultimate goal of the project. This was effectively written in the U.S. Department of Justice office of Community Oriented Policing Services publication, *A Guide to Reducing Crime and Disorder through Problem-Solving Partnerships (2006)*:
Comprehensively analyzing a problem is critical to the success of a problem-solving effort. Effective, tailor-made responses cannot be developed unless you know what is causing the problem (pg 11).

…problem solvers must resist the urge to skip the analysis phase, or they risk addressing a problem that doesn’t exist and/or implementing solutions that are ineffective in the long run (pg 11).

Multiple strategy meetings were held to address the problem of rising crime at the beginning of 2010. Detailed crime analysis was done that helped to better map the days of the week, locations, times, and modus operandi of the reported incidents. Particular interest was paid to the crimes long considered to be the major problems facing the retail area. Those included motor vehicle burglaries, motor vehicle thefts and attempts, and thefts (shoplifting). These crimes made up 97% of all reported crimes in the retail district during 2009. Monetary loss estimates to Arlington businesses from retail theft alone was almost 50 million dollars. This resulted in a loss of sales tax revenue to Arlington of approximately $1.5 million.

Input was sought from business leaders about their observations of the crime trends at their businesses. Important resources for understanding the business perspective were private security and loss prevention employees at various businesses. Their daily contact with victims and suspects helped to draw a better picture of the underlying problems not always apparent in the statistical numbers. The reported observations from these business partners in the analysis phase were instrumental in designing responses to reduce crime in the district.
Another important element of analyzing the problems was the involvement of the beat officers and detectives handling the calls in the area. The officers were asked to assist in intelligence gathering from the beginning of the project. Great emphasis was placed on the officers collecting information through their daily contacts in the area. Officers conducted interviews with victims, suspects, business associates, and many others to help establish a set of common characteristics of the crimes. Their input in the analysis stage of dealing with the problem led directly to their ownership in solving the issue. This transitioned into active participation during the response phase.

Key characteristics of the offenders became apparent during the collection of intelligence. It was suspected early on that repeat offenders were likely causing the majority of the problems. It was also theorized that a fairly small number of repeat offenders were committing most of the crimes. An analysis of the data collected tended to support this theory. While this came as no surprise, several other factors about the offenders were also identified. Officer contacts with suspects showed that a vast majority of the offenders of theft related crimes were also in possession of some form of illegal substances, usually marijuana. Even offenders not caught in possession of drugs were likely to have drug offenses in their criminal history. In addition, analysis showed that the offenders were targeting certain business on consistent days and times. In relation to vehicle burglaries, it was shown that certain makes and models of vehicles were most likely to be victimized.

Another part of analyzing the problem was to look at how the problems were being addressed during the rise in crime. The police department had assigned a small group of officers to work the retail area for many years. These officers essentially only
covered the Parks Mall and surrounding parking lots. Primary responses to crime problems were education to reduce victimization and public relation efforts to facilitate citizen perceptions of safety. Officers also conducted quarterly face to face contact with businesses to exchange information and ideas. These efforts proved to be sufficient methods to deal with crime issues prior to the expansion of the district.

The police department recognized the need to increase the number of officers assigned to the area in 2009 as the area began to expand rapidly. The department developed the South Retail District Unit (SRDU) composed of seven officers and one supervisor to meet the increasing needs of the expanded area. The size of south retail district was essentially tripled to encompass several more major business areas. The primary methods for dealing with problems stayed the same even though the number of officers and size of the area changed. The SRDU still focused primarily on crime prevention methods. Much attention was placed to community events such as safety fairs, vehicle burglary education programs, and children focused events. Quarterly meetings were still held with approximately 15 to 20 business managers. This now represented an extremely small percentage of the total businesses in the area. There was no system of communication with the other businesses other than personal contact. The focus had been on improving the area through creating the citizen perception that the area was safe. However, despite the efforts the area was developing a reputation of having a crime problem. It was not uncommon to hear citizens say they would not patronize the retail area on weekend evenings. The districts increases in crime were adversely affecting the number of customers visiting the area.
Previous emphasis on public education and citizen perceptions had left the criminal element largely ignored. The criminal perception that crimes could be committed with little chance of getting caught became the core of the problem of the increased crime in the area. The criminal perceptions of the area being an easy target led to increasing crime. The resulting increases in crime caused reductions in citizen perceptions of safety and increased business leader complaints. The analysis stage developed a picture of the criminal element active in the district. Intelligence gathering initially focused on identifying the most likely perpetrators. Detailed charts of known offenders with links to their known associates were constructed. Businesses most likely to be targeted where identified including the days and times the crimes were likely to be committed.

**Response**

The officers working the retail district now had an objective to work towards: *Changing the criminal perception.* Every stakeholder had input into the mechanisms by which this would be accomplished. Officers, business leaders, and police management identified some key contributions from each that would work towards this objective.

One of the earliest observations in police response to the problem was that officers in the area were too involved in programs that removed them from the problem. Patrol officers were overwhelmingly involved in developing community public relation programs. They spent considerable time developing presentations to give to a very small amount of business managers. Removing patrol officers from the street to complete these projects left little or no police presence in problem areas. The lack of
officers in these areas likely helped to increase the perception of criminals that they
would not be caught.

The first response to the problem was to drastically increase police contacts with
the public. These police contacts were not solely meant to be enforcement contacts.
The goal was to increase the visibility of officers in the area. One way that officers
increased contact was through the use of bicycle patrols. Removing officers from
vehicles and putting them on bikes allowed for more face to face contact with citizens.
Officers were encouraged to make frequent contacts with citizens in both enforcement
and community caretaking roles.

The analysis phase indicated that apprehending a vehicle burglar or thief in the
process of committing the act was extremely difficult in an area that has over 10,000
parking places. The analysis also identified drug use as the common denominator of
the perpetrators active in the retail district. Officers were extremely adept in identifying
suspects using drugs. Therefore, the focus became catching the drug users before they
could become a thief or burglar. The theory behind this action was that it was easier to
apprehend a possible vehicle burglar before he committed the crime. The phrase we
commonly use is “Catch a suspect before he makes a victim”.

Officers used several tactics to identify drug users. The use of bicycles created
the opportunity for officers to see, hear, and smell far more than they could in vehicles.
Officers were able to identify common problem locations within the retail district as they
made more and more arrests for drug activity. Officers used the additional tactic of
monitoring the closed circuit camera system available to them.
Officers also developed innovative methods for increasing contact with citizens, both in positive interaction and enforcement. They were observant for individuals just sitting in vehicles as the officers patrolled the area. This is not usually a common practice for most people, but it does not rise to the point of reasonable suspicion for an investigative detention. The officers would conduct a consensual contact with the individual to insure that everything was ok. The citizens had legitimate reasons for sitting in their vehicle in most instances. Officers would assist them if they were lost or having some vehicle problems. These types of contacts sometimes led to the discovery of a crime and the officers would deal with it accordingly. These contacts were invaluable to achieving the goals of changing perceptions. Citizens in need of assistance received the help they needed which would further the goal of creating a positive perception of the area. For the criminal who was committing an offense or planning to commit one, the contact with law enforcement would reinforce a perception in them that they would be caught if they committed crimes in the area.

Contacts by officers in the area also continued to develop information. Ongoing scanning and analysis was done throughout the response phase. There was a continued focus to identify new suspects, trends, or changes in information already known. There was always a focus on having the most current and factual information available.

Police contact was a major component of the response, but it was always understood that a project in an area of this size could not succeed without a great deal of business involvement. SRDU officers met frequently with businesses about the objective of changing the criminal perception, and valued the input from the business
partners. Meetings were also conducted with private security officers to address what actions they could take that would help address the problems. Some businesses developed a conduct standard that would be enforced by private security and business personnel. Some of these standards included loitering, boisterous behavior, clothing standards, and other non-criminal actions. Businesses also banned individuals involved in criminal activity from returning to the property. These trespass warnings allowed officers to enforce criminal law violations on subjects for entering the property, even prior to committing any further offenses.

Business participation beyond that of assisting criminal enforcement was essential to implementing long-term solutions. A barrier to business participation was that they were receiving old information about problems. The previous method of conducting quarterly meetings only provided businesses with outdated information. Business managers were also requested to leave their businesses and to come to a different location for the meetings. This proved difficult for managers to accomplish because many of the small businesses would only have one or two employees in a store during weekday business hours. This issue resulted in the low attendance at these meetings of only 15 to 20 managers out of the several hundred total businesses. There were no mechanisms in place to inform the other businesses about crime trends. They would only become aware of a problem when they or their customers were victimized. The business leaders lacked the current information about crime trends needed to be an effective partner in addressing the problems.

It was determined that a system for providing up-to-date, factual information to the majority of businesses was a priority. An email group list was generated of almost
all of the businesses in the area. The system was set up so that businesses could communicate concerns and officers could provide crime information bulletins about the area. The goal was to increase communication and seek assistance from the large number of employees traveling through the area. A valuable resource in the area is the employee workforce in the area every day. Their ability to inform law enforcement of any suspicious behavior helped to increase the identification of criminal activity. Face to face meetings were still an important part of communication with business managers in the area, but it was no longer used as the sole means for relaying important information.

The police department understands the economic impact of tourism in the city. The department engages in a tourism oriented policing philosophy as part of its Geographical based policing model. As part of this philosophy the department uses social media to produce public service announcements designed to decrease victimization of citizens. These included information about positive stories about the project and the area and were distributed using multiple social media and traditional media outlets. The use of social media fit into the department’s goal of fully informing citizens and visitors about the safety and security of the many venues within the retail district and throughout the city.

The hiring of additional security personnel and the use of CCTV are two recommended responses to problems in parking lots according to a Community Oriented Policing Services Publication, *Thefts of and From Cars in Parking Facilities (2004).* A great example of this is the steps taken by the Parks Mall at Arlington. The mall contracts with Valor Security to provide a uniformed security presence inside the mall and in the surrounding parking lots. Valor has expanded their response to the
problem in several ways, including implementing bicycle patrols to supplement their foot and vehicle patrols. Valor Security also monitors a multimillion dollar surveillance system that consists of more than 80 cameras throughout the property. The system supplies law enforcement with a tool in the apprehension and prosecution of offenders.

Valor Security also employs uniformed off duty Arlington Police officers to work inside the mall. These officers worked in conjunction with on duty officers, uniformed security, and business management to address any problems inside the mall or in the parking lots. The businesses expanded the purchase of radios so that the police officers, security guards, and mall management could be able to communicate directly. This helped to eliminate the delay in police response because security personnel had to dial 911 and wait for officers to be dispatched.

Another example of how businesses and the police department worked together on the problem was the use of additional police resources in the parking lots. More specifically, Sky watch Towers, decoy police vehicles, and bait car deployments were used in specific problem parking lots. These resources were often used in conjunction with lock your car campaigns generally centered on the use of vehicle burglary report cards. As mentioned in *Thefts of and From Cars in Parking Facilities (2004)*, some of these measures have shown limited effectiveness in deterring crime. The analysis of the retail districts indicated this was true, specifically when these measures were used as the main focus of reducing crime. The deployment of these resources during the project focused on supplementing the increases in police contacts and the business involvement aspects of the response.
The expanded use of citizen volunteers to increase visibility in problem areas was recognized as an important additional resource. The Arlington Police Department has an active citizen volunteer force that assists the community with Citizen On Patrol (COP) functions. Volunteers contributed to this program by performing deterrence patrols throughout the retail area. The volunteers conducted their patrols in either their personal vehicles, with magnetic signs attached, or in COP-Mobile specially marked vehicles provided by the city. They also staffed the department’s Sky watch Towers and assisted with public education programs such as vehicle burglary report card inspections. The involvement of citizen volunteers increased each year of the project.

The increased police contact, expanded business participation, and use of citizen volunteers were key components to establishing long term solutions. These steps began in the fall of 2009 and expanded each consecutive year. The responses to the problem became self reinforcing as successes were identified during the on-going assessments. Officers made more contacts, businesses became more active, and citizens volunteered more hours. Each stakeholder became more invested in the area and the mission to lower crime.

Assessment

The goal of the project was always a long term solution to crime problems. The retail district SARA projects were previously short termed plans to deal with sudden spikes in specific crimes. There was no precedent for implementing a multi-year plan, and therefore, no history of successes or failures to draw from. Officers were continually updated on crime statistics during the project. However, no specific number or percentage decrease in crime statistics was identified as the measurement of
success. All stakeholders involved in the project understood that if there was a focus on
the plan, then the crime numbers would take care of themselves.

The plan was to halt the rising crime trend during the first year of the project, and
then decreasing total crimes is subsequent years. An assessment was completed at
the end of 2010 that showed not only had the rising trend been halted, but crime had
decreased overall by 13%. There was a 19% decrease in motor vehicle burglary, 34%
decrease in auto thefts and attempts, and a 10% decrease in shoplifting/theft cases.
The statistics indicated that the plan for addressing the problem had initial success
during the first year. There was continued focus on increasing police contacts,
expanding the business involvement, and more involvement from citizen volunteers.

The assessment process continued to show positive results from the plan
throughout 2011. A review of the statistics was conducted at the end of the year, and it
showed continued decreases in crime from 2010 to 2011. The overall number of crimes
fell by another 17%. Burglary of motor vehicle crimes fell by 45%, and shoplifting/theft
cases decreased by 2%. The most significant drop was in motor vehicle thefts and
attempts, which saw a decrease of 61%. (See appendices, Figure 3)

Two consecutive years of decreasing crimes reinforced the idea that the project
was on the right path towards the project’s ultimate goal. The statistical analysis was
supported by observed anecdotal evidence that the project was having success.
Conversations with citizens were turning noticeably more positive in relation to their
perception of safety in the retail area. Conversations with criminals showed that their
perceptions had begun to change as well. Multiple comments by suspects suggested
that the increase in police contacts were making them increasingly uncomfortable. To use their term heard multiple times, the area had become “too hot” with police officers.

The three year mark of the project was thought to be an important one to gauge whether long term change had taken effect. The statistics indicated that from 2011 to 2012 there were continued decreases in almost every category. Overall crime numbers fell by another 22%, with motor vehicle burglaries dropping by 54% and theft/shoplifting cases decreasing by another 19%. Vehicle theft cases had essentially stayed flat from 2011, but both years were at the lowest levels ever reported in the area. (See appendices, Figure 4)

The project was developed as a multi-year, long term effort to reduce crime in the area. The program officially began at the end of 2009. An assessment comparing the crime statistics of the area for 2009 and 2012 provided a clearer picture of the project’s effectiveness. Overall crime in the area had been reduced by 705 offenses, or 44%, during the three year project. The main targeted offenses also showed great reductions. Motor vehicle burglaries decreased by 80%, vehicle thefts decreased by 72%, shoplifting offenses decreased by 33%, and other thefts fell by 21%. The only category that did not decrease was commercial burglary, which increased by 3 offenses. (See appendices, Figure 2)

Displacement of the criminal element was a concern during the planning and implementation of this project. The responsibility to not simply move the problem to somewhere or someone else was recognized from the outset. This was addressed early on in the project by implementing certain strategies that would mitigate possible
displacement. The primary preventative measure was increased communication within our agency and neighboring agencies.

Every piece of intelligence that was gathered was placed into an online folder that was accessible by anyone within our agency. Data on repeat offenders was routinely shared both internally and externally. Crime bulletins were regularly sent to other districts within our department and to other departments in the area. Officers from Arlington involved in the project attended meetings and conferences with other agencies, participated in list sharing email groups, and worked with other agencies on a task force operation targeting theft suspects at an area flea market. On-going assessments of city wide crime statistics were conducted to evaluate possible displacement from the project area.

**Conclusion**

The crime reduction project has never had an expiration date. The goal has always been to establish long term changes to the area. This project was developed as a blueprint for addressing problems in the present and the future. There is an awareness that there will be periods of increased crime and problems as new suspects enter the area, or previously dealt with criminals attempt to reenter the area. The hundreds of businesses and thousands of vehicles make the area a tempting target for those wishing to commit crimes. The task of changing the criminal perception is an ongoing one that will likely see its share of challenges. There will continue to be changes in police personnel, security personnel, business managers and citizen volunteers that need to be educated about the ongoing project. The sustainability of the
positive changes can only be accomplished through education and buy-in of the stakeholders and the continued use of the SARA model in dealing with crime issues. The increased use of tactical intelligence, number of citizen contacts by officers, the strong partnership with businesses, and the still growing volunteerism of our citizens has created a strong base for the future.
### Figure 1. Table of crime statistics showing the increase in crime from 2006 to 2009.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offense Type</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>600.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>955</td>
<td>1470</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>53.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoplifting</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vehicle Burglary</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>69.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vehicle Theft</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>72.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>1607</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
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### Figure 2. Table of crime statistics showing the decrease in crime from 2009 to 2012.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offense Type</th>
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<th>2012</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Change</th>
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<td>Murder</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-14.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>1470</td>
<td>834</td>
<td>-636</td>
<td>-43.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shoplifting</td>
<td>399</td>
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<td>641</td>
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<td>Vehicle Theft</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>88</td>
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<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>1607</td>
<td>902</td>
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<td>-43.9%</td>
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<td>South Retail Area</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
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<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>Theft (all)</td>
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<td>912</td>
<td>1041</td>
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<td>Vehicle Burglary</td>
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<td>Motor Veh. Theft</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>1139</td>
<td>1402</td>
<td>1607</td>
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Figure 3. Table illustrating the crime statistics from the year before the project start (2009) through each year of the project.
Figure 4. Graph illustrating the rise in overall crime rate from 2006 to 2009, and the subsequent decrease in crime from 2009 to 2012.

Figure 5. Chart demonstrating the relationship of officer initiated contacts to the overall crime rate.
Figure 6. Graph illustrating reported vehicle burglary crimes from 2006 to 2012.

Figure 7. Graph illustrating reported theft and shoplifting crimes between 2006 and 2012.
Figure 8. Graph illustrating vehicle thefts and attempts between 2006 and 2012.
Increased officer contact with citizens in both enforcement and community caretaking roles were key to addressing perceptions about the area.
Business leaders committed to the large investments of additional resources such as CCTV and uniformed security.
Non criminal actions that created negative perceptions about the area were addressed by the businesses.
The use of additional resources and citizen volunteers supplemented efforts to increase visibility in the district.
Arlington Police Department Vehicle Burglary Report Card used by officers and volunteers to encourage citizens to not leave valuables in their vehicles.