

Nominee for The Herman Goldstein Excellence in Solving Award.

Todd Wilkinson #3432
San Diego Police Dept.
Northern Patrol Division

July 18, 1996

SCANNING:

The problem involved illegal drag racing in several locations throughout the city of San Diego. I noticed the problem immediately when I transferred to Northern Patrol Division in 1993. During my patrol duties and by receiving radio calls, I noticed large groups of car clubs, gang members, and illegal drag racing in approximately six to seven locations throughout the city. The problem involved primarily three divisions, Northern, Northeastern and Eastern.

I realized the potential danger involved in January of 1994 when a shooting occurred at 9400 Scranton Rd. This shooting involved several Asian gang members who shot at least two high powered rifles into a crowd of approximately one-hundred car club members loitering in a parking lot. Fortunately, only two people were actually injured by the shots, but several buildings and several cars were also struck.

Shortly after the shooting, I began to notice several of these race-type vehicles were involved in collisions. A few of the collisions were fatal. Several months after the above shooting, a murder occurred at another racing location by Asian gang members. These reasons plus an increase in vandalisms, fight calls, shooting at buildings and an overall increasing number of calls for service at the racing locations motivated me to solve the problem.

ANALYSIS:

I spoke to my department's crime analysis unit in order to determine any significance in man hours spent at these racing locations. I also wanted to determine the exact days of the week and times the three divisions were receiving the calls for service at these locations. In addition, I spent as much time as I could at many of these locations writing citations and speaking to the reporting parties/security guards in the affected areas. I also contacted the property owners of the affected properties. I asked them to post "no loitering" signs and obtained consent to enforce laws on their properties.

I determined that the most, common night for the illegal racing to occur was on Saturday from approximately 2300 hrs. to 0300 hrs. Sunday morning. I personally discovered (by responding to various radio calls and interaction with the groups) that there were actually two groups involved in street racing/car clubbing.

One group was predominately older (25-40yrs. of age) white males involved in building and racing the older type of "muscle-cars." These cars were the early '60s through late '70s Camaros, Mustangs, El Caminos, Challengers, Corvettes, etc. They generally did not associate with the next group and frequented racing locations separate from them. This group is, for the most part, cooperative with the police.

The next group consisted primarily of Asian and Hispanic males and females of a wide range of ages (16-25yrs. of age). Many were involved in street gangs, gun trading, gambling, and drugs etc. This group drove primarily Asian type cars also designed for street and road course racing. These cars consisted of newer model Hondas, Acuras, Nissans, Mitsubishis, etc. This group was generally uncooperative when contacted by the police and the entire group (sometimes up to 200 cars) would flee at the sight of a police vehicle.

This group was also very well organized, and would send scouts into a racing location to look for the police prior to setting up a race. Many of the car's owners would communicate via cellular phones and monitored police radio traffic by-way-of scanners.

Most of the information I received from crime analysis was of limited value. The calls for service on the data sheets did not reflect the severity of problem and the inherent danger actually involved.

I learned by talking to other officers that the problem had existed for several years, and other attempts to address the problem were short lived. More recently, I noticed that officers were responding to calls of racing and taking little or no enforcement action at all.

RESPONSE:

I tried a couple of responses in an attempt to remove the desire to race at the usual locations. First I tried placing "phantom cars" (unoccupied marked police vehicles parked and creating the appearance that the police are present) at the locations. I also frequently drove through the racing locations and wrote citations whenever possible. I managed to occasionally obtain assistance from a few other officers. The "phantom cars" proved to be ineffective, and several of the cars were vandalized. The small number of citations I was able to issue in a shift was futile.

I also sent a "Traffic Engineering Request" to my department's traffic division. I requested speed bumps or some type of device to prevent racing at these racing locations. The traffic engineering request was denied, and the traffic surveyor would not provide or approve any alternatives.

Prior to (and for several years after) becoming a police officer, I was a professional mechanic and a professional race car driver. I had also done my share of street drag racing on occasion in high school. So I was

familiar with the street racer's mentality. Recently, I took a course on a topic in which I am extremely interested, Environmental Technology.

I knew that my project had to create an atmosphere (physical and psychological) where the racer would not want to go because there was a likelihood he would receive several citations and possibly have his vehicle impounded (which is the worst thing imaginable for a person totally engrossed in his hobby/car). I also knew that this project had to have a massive impact on the group, and it would require a great number of personnel to achieve that goal. My "goal" was to stop both of the two group from racing at any of the usual locations and rid the divisions of the associated problems and calls for service. I did not want to move the problem from my division into another division for someone else to deal with. Therefore, I wanted it to be a joint project. I would help other divisions attack the problem while other divisions helped solve the problem in my division.

I knew that the utilization of manpower was important to my department and it would be difficult to obtain the necessary officers to create the impact I desired. Patrol staffing was at a minimum, so I would have to negotiate with other divisions to obtain a sufficient number of officers for this project. On the other hand, the preservation of life was of the utmost importance to my department. If this problem was allowed to continue, someone was certain to be killed.

I created a tactical action plan to attack the racers at several locations throughout the three involved divisions. The largest tactical concern was the mobility of the racers and the problem. This meant that my special detail also had to be mobile. The next concern was to have all of the involved officers get into a racing location (which would not be known until the races began) without being seen. I stated before that the racers would flee if they saw any officers. This created a hazard to the racers as well as the officers if a police pursuit was initiated.

Next, I had to figure a way to enforce laws which would have the greatest impact on the racers and their cars. Since I was previously involved in racing, I knew that many of the street racers disconnected their vehicle's smog equipment in order to gain more performance. California enacted a law many years ago which made it illegal to disconnect, modify, or tamper with a vehicle's smog equipment. My knowledge of vehicle's smog systems was limited, so I called the State of California Bureau of Automotive Repair (B.A.R.) for assistance. The B.A.R. (along with the California Air Resources Board) is responsible for overseeing the state's vehicle emission reduction program.

The B.A.R. representatives and I organized a program where officers could conduct smog equipment inspections on vehicles (specifically street race vehicles) and issue the owner a citation if the smog equipment was disconnected, tampered, or modified. Once the owner was cited, he could only have the car reinspected and the modifications approved by a "referee." A "referee" is a smog equipment technician who contracts with the B.A.R. to resolve disputes over smog equipment problems. The "referee" is closely monitored by the B.A.R. so there is little likelihood he will violate the law and certify an illegal vehicle. The officer would also order the vehicle owner to remove the vehicle from the street until it complied with the law.

The next step was to organize a group of personnel to conduct inspections and enforce the various vehicle code sections, curfew laws, and any other pertinent laws. First, I managed to get several B.A.R. representatives to commit themselves to the project to conduct vehicle smog inspections in the field. Next, I met with a traffic division sergeant and several traffic officers in order to explain the problem to them. After the meeting, I managed to get the traffic sergeant (Sgt. Sam Campbell) to commit an entire squad (6-8 persons) to the project.

The third step was to solicit support from each of the seven patrol divisions. I also needed one officer to drive a prisoner van and another to drive an undercover vehicle. I managed to obtain a total of approximately twenty to twenty five persons (depending on the detail) from various divisions (including traffic, K-9s and five B.A.R. representatives).

Once I received a commitment for personnel, I felt it was necessary to train all of the personnel on the various laws we would be enforcing. I organized several training sessions in which the B.A.R. representatives and I taught officers how to inspect smog equipment, issue citations for smog violations and how to testify in court. In addition, we "brainstormed" other equipment violations which were frequently found on these types of vehicles. I had two officers write a list of frequent violations to use during the project.

I drew large diagrams of each of the racing locations, and I also drew smaller diagrams for use by the officers. During the briefings, I used the large diagrams to describe the plan of attack. The involved officers were given a particular unit designator which coincided with a perimeter location on the maps. Each unit had to respond to his particular location when told to do so in order to prevent being seen and the racers fleeing. Once each of the perimeter units was in place, then another marked unit would drive into the scene of the race. When the race vehicles fled, they were prevented from leaving by the perimeter units. This tactic was used also to prevent an opportunity for the-racers to flee from the police and to prevent a pursuit and possible injury to anyone involved.

A plain clothes officer in an undercover car was used to check the locations and locate the racers. The officer then relayed the location back to awaiting officers on a tactical frequency. The marked units would then move to their designated locations. The undercover car was provided by my department's robbery unit.

Upon reaching the perimeter units, each vehicle was inspected for smog equipment by the B.A.R. representatives. The other equipment on the car was inspected for compliance with the vehicle code by uniformed officers. The driver's license was checked for validity and a warrant check conducted. Each occupant's age was checked. Any curfew violators were arrested and placed in a prisoner van. They were eventually transported to the sub-station where their parents were notified.

Once business was completed at this location, the group of officers and B.A.R. reps would move to the next location where the undercover officer spotted another group. Occasionally our detail would deliberately drive into the center of the racers unexpectedly. We used this tactic to display our presence. Each officer would pick out a violator, stop it and take appropriate enforcement action. The officers were under strict orders not to pursue any fleeing vehicles unless they were wanted for a violent felony.

This detail was conducted every Saturday night for approximately four weeks. I titled this detail the Vehicle Abatement to Prevent Organized Racing (V.A.P.O.R.) detail. The results were immediate, so I down-scaled the detail for several weeks after the initial four weeks. Each time the detail was performed, I gathered statistical data about the type of enforcement conducted.

EVALUATION/ASSESSMENT:

The results were obvious after the first four weeks. The racers/car clubs stopped going to the usual locations. There was a reduction in racing activity of approximately 50 to 100% depending on the location. There was a reduction in calls for service of approximately 80%. Many locations were not being used for racing until just recently. I found that approximately 95% of the "race cars" had smog equipment violations.

These results lasted approximately one year while being monitored regularly. To this date, some of the racers have trickled back to one of the usual locations in my division (after my brief absence). They are, however, in smaller groups of ten to twenty cars. They are easier to manage now, and only a few police units are needed to manage the groups. I have continued to monitor the problem location, and I still do some enforcement there. Unfortunately, the problem has recently returned to the two other divisions, Northeastern and Eastern, and it is as large a problem as before this detail. I firmly believe that the reason for this is the officers failed to monitor the locations and continue enforcement.

One of the problems I encountered in implementing my plan was lack of support from many supervisors. I received resistance when I asked to borrow an officer. Supervisors in charge of the division that had 75% of the problem areas were particularly defiant.

I assisted the other divisions with implementation of similar projects. In fact, I recently attended a PAAC meeting which was also attended by the San Diego County Sheriff's Dept. and the California Highway Patrol. They have also helped my department with similar projects. This project was the first of its kind in San Diego. It has also gotten officers department wide involved in enforcing smog laws.

PHILOSOPHY and ORGANIZATION:

All of my department's officers and managers received training in problem solving/neighborhood policing over the past few years. It has been an ongoing process, and many officers are involved in problem solving projects. My particular project was initiated solely by me, but eventually it became a cooperative effort by many of the officers involved. My department's police chief (Chief Jerry Sanders) was entirely supportive of my project.

After the initial four week period, I wrote commendations to all of the officers involved in this project. I commended all of the officers for their involvement in problem solving. I think this set an example and an incentive for other officers to get involved. This project did not cost my department any monetary resources. All of the involved officers were "on-duty" when the project was conducted, so no one was paid overtime. Some of the officers voluntarily adjusted their hours to accommodate the detail. Approximately only four-percent of the defendants contested their cases in traffic court. Many of the officers were paid over-time for attending court; however, many of the officers attended court on-duty. Therefore the cost of overtime was minimal, I have not been able to determine the exact cost.

The Bureau of Automotive Repair has seen this as such a beneficial project that last year they obtained funds in their budget to allow their personnel to work similar projects. Their representatives adjusted their hours in order to work with me on my project; they too were not paid overtime. The cost to the B.A.R. was also minute.