

CRUISING ABATEMENT PROJECT

REDUCING STREET CRUISING AND RELATED CRIME

SANTA ANA POLICE DEPARTMENT, CALIFORNIA, 1997

- THE PROBLEM:** Santa Ana was plagued by the problem of street cruising. On Sunday evenings, up to 1,000 carloads of cruisers descended on a major thoroughfare to gather and socialize. The problem was exacerbated by use of drugs and alcohol and violent conflicts between rival street gangs. This problem resulted in serious adverse impact on neighborhoods and the police department's ability to deliver service on "cruise night".
- ANALYSIS:** Merchants complained of losing business. Residents complained about the noise from car stereos and gang members yelling obscenities and firing their guns damaging their homes and vehicles. Annually, an estimated 4,000 cruiser related phone complaints were received along with hundreds of complaints about poor police service during cruising hours. Police officers complained that traffic made it nearly impossible to respond to emergencies. Police officers and dispatchers were overwhelmed by phone calls.
- RESPONSE:** A campaign was initiated to develop community support and recruit volunteers to provide support during abatement operations, gain assistance from businesses in securing entrances to parking lots and providing space for police operations, gain the support of the California State Legislature in instituting changes to anti-cruising laws, and design and implement a multi-phased program to discourage cruising. Signs and written warnings were designed to satisfy minimum legal standards. Controlled vehicular movement and personal contact with officers issuing anti-cruising warnings were used to identify each driver and a record of contact were used to eliminate anonymity.
- ASSESSMENT:** Two and a half years after the Cruising Abatement Project was initiated cruising related criminal acts and cruiser related calls for service have been virtually eliminated. Regular patrons and families have replaced cruising participant customers of gas stations and restaurants. No citizen complaints of officer misconduct or lawsuits resulted from operations, and the constitutionality of the program was not challenged.
-

INTRODUCTION

Santa Ana is the forty-ninth largest city in the United States, the ninth largest city in California, and the State's second most densely populated city. The Santa Ana Police Department is comprised of approximately 650 personnel and

provides services utilizing a Community Oriented Policing philosophy within four autonomous policing districts.

Beginning in the early 1970's, organized car clubs and groups of unruly adolescents began frequenting a six block long length of S. Bristol

St. on Sunday evenings, and engaging in street cruising activity. This area consists of a four lane major thoroughfare, lined on both sides with strip mall and shopping center parking areas and is surrounded by single-family residential neighborhoods. By the early 1990's, the problem had grown to the point that, on Sunday evenings, from 9:00 P.M. until 3:00 A.M., street cruising in this small area of the community was seriously disrupting the normal lives of residents and was adversely impacting public safety, citywide.

On those evenings, up to 1,000 carloads of cruisers gathered in this small area, clogging streets and parking areas both on Bristol St. and in residential areas up to four blocks on either side of the main thoroughfare. Other associated impacts on the area were occurring as a result of heavy vehicular traffic, consumption of alcohol and drugs by participants, the presence of rival street gangs, associated violence and other crime.

In early 1994, the department initiated a comprehensive study of the problem utilizing problem-solving techniques when it became clear that traditional enforcement methods were ineffective. Volunteer personnel assigned to the department's Southcoast Police District undertook this study. The study was completed in January, 1995, and utilized interviews with owners of area businesses and members of affected residential neighborhood associations; surveys of cruising participants, affected motorists and local residents; and, research into methods used by other jurisdictions to address similar problems.

During the course of the study, officers actively revitalized dormant neighborhood associations to develop a base of interested and supportive stakeholders; conducted a series of public forums to discuss the problem and possible solutions; and, participated in direct political discussions with elected officials to garner support and resources for required actions. Officers also developed experimental enforcement strategies, tested those experimental strategies under field conditions and conducted assessment and review of strategies. Upon completion of this process, officers developed an intervention strategy based

on their analysis and experimentation which required physical and environmental change, political mobilization of stakeholders and creation of a short-term task force program utilizing personnel from twenty-six law enforcement agencies.

SCANNING

Each Saturday and Sunday night, over 1,000 vehicles filled to capacity with young adults arrived in Santa Ana to cruise. Between 2130 hours and 0230 hours, they cruised a one-mile stretch of Bristol Street located within the Southcoast Policing District. The vehicles generally contained members of the same sex and age group, and often gang members. The primary purpose was to meet and socialize with members of the opposite sex. Cruising, a seemingly harmless event was the cause of traffic gridlock, noise, general disorder, crime, violence, and great fiscal expense.

Community reaction to this problem was significant, with many local residents very vocally indicating their displeasure and calling for massive allocation of police resources to deal with the cruising problem. Many residents felt they were being held hostage in their homes and businesses began to close on cruise night or all together because of economic losses attributable to the problem. Politically, the department found itself under pressure to act immediately and strongly, despite the fact that doing so would require considerable expenditures of, funds from its an already strained budget without certainty of success.

ANALYSIS

Community members were surveyed through meetings and personal contacts. Merchants complained that traffic gridlock kept regular customers from patronizing their businesses. Many businesses closed early to avoid subjecting their customers to intimidation by cruisers. Several food establishments and one record store welcomed the cruiser business but were concerned for the safety of their employees. Most open businesses paid for private security.

Residents complained that loud noise from car

stereos and gunshots kept their families awake until early morning hours. Large numbers of gang members drove through their neighborhoods and congregated on sidewalks near their homes drinking and yelling obscenities at passing carloads of other cruising participants. Fights often broke out and gunshots were fired hitting their homes and vehicles. Residents and other motorists were often delayed by traffic for up to one hour.

Police Officers complained that traffic on Bristol Street was impassable for emergency response. Responding to major incidents in the cruising zone often resulted in confrontations with gang members and shots fired in their immediate vicinity. Officers were overwhelmed by calls for service and crime scenes on cruising nights. Routinely, over 50 calls for service were pending dispatch, as field patrol resources were committed to deal with the issue, and additional resources were not available from other sources.

Dispatchers and desk personnel were overwhelmed by phone calls. Annually, an estimated 4,000 cruiser related phone complaints were received along with hundreds of complaints about poor police service during cruising hours.

Analysis of cruiser related "Calls for Service" in the six Statistical Reporting Districts, or grids, containing the Bristol Cruising Zone showed that in 1993, there were 1,200 cruiser related calls for service. In 1994 there were 990, and in the first 3 months of 1995, there were 220. In these grids, cruiser related incidents increased calls for service up to 218% annually. These figures do not include hundreds of cruiser related incidents that occurred away from the cruising zone.

Analysis of cruiser related criminal activity in the six grids containing the Bristol Cruising zone revealed that in 1993, there were 181 cruising related crimes, which included 6 homicides and 36 felony assaults. In 1994, there were 131 incidents, which included 8 homicides and 25 felony assaults. During the first three months of 1995, there were 35 incidents, which included 2 homicides and 9 felony assaults. During this same time period an additional 66 reported incidents involving the discharge or

brandishing of firearms and 92 other felony offenses occurred, which were directly attributable to cruising. These figures do not include numerous cruiser related crimes, which occurred in other areas of Santa Ana.

Since 1991, Southcoast District Directed Patrol Officers had been assigned cruising enforcement duty on Sunday nights. During that time, enforcement action resulting in citation or arrest had been taken against at least 1,000 cruising participants each year without noticeable impact on the problem.

In 1994, an attempt was made to avert the level of criminal activity experienced in previous years. A Cruising Enforcement Detail was deployed on Sunday as there were insufficient resources to work both Saturday and Sunday nights. The detail was comprised of all Directed Patrol Officers and Southcoast District night shift officers, 20 personnel in total. Enforcement action was taken against 4,695 cruisers during that period, again with no deterrent effect other than a decrease in calls for service and reported crimes on Sunday nights. To realize that decrease, Directed Patrol Teams and the district night shift lost 20% of available man-hours in addressing the cruising issue.

While engaged in this enforcement effort, a comprehensive written survey of cruising participants was conducted to assist in development of more effective abatement strategies and to assess impact of traditional enforcement efforts. The surveys revealed cruisers were attracted to Santa Ana because of the large crowds and level of social interaction accompanying this event. Cruising was safer in Santa Ana than in other cities because of police presence, and receiving a citation was a small price to pay for participation in cruising. The excitement of witnessing violent crimes, police responses to incidents, and other police activities provided entertainment for participants. Surveys of Southern California cities, and additional research regarding published studies of similar problems in other U.S. cities, offered no solutions.

Existing state and local anti-Cruising Laws were studied and found to be ineffective, tactically inappropriate and costly. Santa Ana Municipal

Codes 36-500 thru 36-504 (Cruising Controls) were written in compliance with California Vehicle Code 21100(k) which requires that a traffic control point be established; that a cruiser pass through the control point three times within four hours; and, that a written warning be given on the second pass predicate to arrest.

RESPONSE

The past five years of traditional anti-cruising efforts consisted of: no intervention; small scale directed patrol enforcement efforts; major multi-agency task force enforcement operations; total street closure; traffic diversion onto side operations mirroring DUI checkpoints; and, an assigned Cruising Enforcement Detail. These efforts had resulted in no impact on the issue and survey results indicated that our efforts had exacerbated activity.

A comprehensive strategy was developed as a result of information gained from participant surveys, officer observations, and subject matter research, and which was designed to address participant motivation rather than traditional enforcement responses. That strategy was in four parts:

PART I: Initiate a campaign to develop a community support base to provide demonstrable political support for enforcement and environmental change strategies which could result in long-term inconvenience to the public, and to assist in providing logistic support for operations. Videotapes and police department statistical data proved valuable in illustrating the urgent need to remove cruising from the community.

PART II: Gain assistance from businesses in installing and securing chains at entrances to parking lots, and in providing space for Command Post operations. Gain assistance from Local streets; traffic Diversion onto freeways; traffic control point Community Oriented Policing groups (Neighborhood Watch) in staffing command post support positions during abatement operations.

PART III: Gain support of the California State Legislature through the assistance of our elected State Assemblyman in instituting changes to

anti-cruising laws. Submit a proposal to up-date existing anti-cruising laws and related traffic statutes to address the realities of today's cruising scene and related constitutional issues.

PART IV: Design and implement a multi-phased program to discourage cruisers from wanting to cruise in Santa Ana. This program was designed to: 1) Eliminate the climate of fear within the community created by cruising; 2) Eliminate gunfire and general disorder; 3) Eliminate homicides, felony assaults, carjackings, robberies and other crimes related to cruising; 4) Eliminate an environment hostile to assigned police personnel; 5) Eliminate the large number of complaints regarding cruising; 6) Eliminate thousands of calls for service generated by cruising activity; 7) Eliminate a major fiscal expense for the City; 8) Restore night shift and directed patrol officers to regular duties; and, 9) Restore a high level of police services to the city which was being adversely impacted by efforts to address cruising related issues.

This program was implemented in three phases:

PHASE I—Design a strategy to abate cruising omitting duplication of previously failed attempts and utilizing nontraditional methods.

Surveys and personal observation brought about the realization that cruising was now an "Event" which had grown to the point that the expectation of participants was that disorder, violence, and police enforcement activities were an integral part of the cruising experience. It was felt that changing the nature of the event would create a disincentive for attendance by addressing the basic motivation of participants to attend.

The "Rock Concert Atmosphere" of the cruising event was clearly the attraction, and changing the riotous, uncontrolled environment to one of strictly controlled parameters was the probable solution.

There was a permeating attitude among cruisers that they owned the streets within the cruising zone and could do what they wanted. Their strength was in numbers and anonymity, and that fact and belief reinforced their uncontrolled

behavior. Two observed opportunities for intervention to impact motivation was that cruisers lacked knowledge of anti-cruising laws, and that a significant number were juveniles driving vehicles beyond their means, probably borrowed from parents or others.

Controlled vehicular movement, and personal contact with officers issuing anti-cruising warnings would be the "New Event". Identification of each driver, and a record of contact, would eliminate anonymity. Follow up letters sent to Registered Owners of vehicles, indicating that their vehicles were possibly being used for street cruising in violation of local and state ordinances, would reduce the number of non-driver-owned vehicles returning to cruise while educating parents as to the dangers of such activity.

Written traffic control point warnings required by anti-cruising statutes provided a tool to stop and control vehicular movement. The major consideration in meeting state mandated stop and notice requirements was the need to process hundreds of vehicles, without legally unacceptable delay, so as to avoid violation of rights of motorists and passengers. A production assembly line concept was developed through a practical exercise technique, which met detention, arrest, and prosecution guidelines.

Signs and written warnings were designed to satisfy minimum legal standards without providing information sufficient to educate cruisers of statute loopholes. Contact with the media concerning the abatement program and the nature of the cruising problem were avoided to circumvent attention to the issue and exacerbation of the problem.

PHASE II—Initiate high profile, large scale multi-agency operations to immediately reduce the cruising population. Allow for flexibility and adjust operations to meet changing conditions.

The initial nights of multi-agency operations were designed to filter traffic in the cruising zone through traffic control points utilizing traffic pattern control. This ability to control traffic patterns was brought about by installation of permanent chains and barriers at side street and parking lot entrances permitting limited

access to areas and flexibility in structuring traffic flow. Anti-cruising warnings were issued and follow-up letters

Cruiser attendance dropped immediately and operations were downsized and changed to car stops, and consensual encounters with groups of congregated cruisers. Anti-cruising warnings continued to be issued and ID's obtained.

PHASE III—Focus on standing down police activities in direct proportion to cruising activity, allowing environmental changes to act as a natural long range deterrent to continued cruising.

On cruising nights, thousands of motorists and nearby residents were prevented from using Bristol Street. It was our belief that with cruising reduced or eliminated, and police activities no longer a highly visible coercive presence, legitimate users would quickly re-populate the cruising zone blocking cruisers from regaining a foothold.

ASSESSMENT

The Cruising Abatement Project was initiated on March 19, 1995. Through July 1, 1997, two and one-half years later, no cruising related criminal acts have been reported, and no cruiser related calls for service or complaints have been received. On nights where police resources were previously over-committed to deal with this issue, backlogs of calls for service awaiting available resources and citywide complaints of delayed police response are no longer received. Bristol St. has returned to being an open major traffic artery. Regular patrons and families have replaced cruising participant customers of gas stations and restaurants. Three major grocery stores and other businesses located within the former cruising zone have extended store hours on Saturday and Sunday nights to address renewed customer demand. A Catholic High School located within the former cruising zone and adversely impacted by that activity has changed plans to relocate its campus to another city; and, is instead, significantly expanding its campus.

During the course of the Cruising Abatement Project, 2,104 anti-cruising warnings were

issued and 1,738 follow-up letters were mailed. Enforcement action, either through citation or arrest, was taken against only 1,178 cruising participants. No citizen complaints of officer misconduct or lawsuits resulted from operations, and the constitutionality of the program was not challenged. All persons arrested at traffic control points were successfully prosecuted.

Traffic control point operations designed to issue anti-cruising warnings and identify participants proved to a major disincentive for participants. Traffic control points were 90% effective in immediately eliminating street cruising, as later evidenced by random sampling. Letters were also highly effective, as evidenced by immediate reaction from participating youth and concern of parents. As anticipated, an environment devoid of street cruising quickly fostered high speed traffic and legitimate business usage, and has served as a deterrent to renewed cruising. In fact, during maintenance operations, most cruisers driving through the area left town after viewing the dramatic change to their former cruising zone.

Throughout the project, data was collected on frequency of return of vehicles to the cruising zone. This data was analyzed through application of a technique useful in ecological and zoological research to estimate hidden animal populations. This mark and recapture analysis technique, known as the "Schnabel Method", was used to estimate the total Southern California cruiser population impacting Santa Ana.

That analysis revealed a total sample population of 22,300 vehicles, of which nearly 10,000 routinely visited this community to engage in cruising. Observational and raw survey data indicated that approximately 1,000 vehicles were involved in cruising on any given weekend evening, but that those vehicles were not the same vehicles, weekend to weekend. As a result, it may be concluded that, on any given evening, a hidden population of approximately 9,000 vehicles was not evident. That information, combined with observational data indicating average vehicle occupancy at five persons per vehicle, reveals that the behavior of approximately 50,000 persons was directly impacted and modified by this program.

The total cost of the Cruising Abatement Project was \$160,000. During the previous 11 months, cruising enforcement operations were conducted on Sunday night only at a cost of \$250,000. Over the preceding four years, cruising enforcement operations had resulted in cost of \$50,000 each year. Additional overtime costs required to investigate cruiser related criminal incidents exceeded \$75,000 per year. As a result, total cost of anti-cruising enforcement operations over the preceding 5 years was in excess of \$825,000. Additionally, had enforcement operations been expanded to both Saturday and Sunday evenings, projected cost for each future year was estimated at \$575,000 per year. Had this intervention not been successful, and had enforcement operations continued, this department would have incurred additional expenditures of between \$313,000 at minimum and \$1.44 Million, at existing levels of equipment and manpower commitment.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this problem solving intervention was to remove entrenched cruisers from the Bristol Cruising Zone and from Santa Ana altogether. Santa Ana Police Department personnel worked closely with outside police agencies, local businesses, local residents, neighborhood associations, and COP groups acting in partnership to resolve this problem. Through a combination of nontraditional operations, varied enforcement efforts, and environmental changes, the problems associated with Bristol Street Cruising were resolved and program goals were attained.

Officers and support staff directly assigned to enforcement operations initiated this successful application of problem-solving techniques at the organization's operations level. The Commander of the Southcoast Police District Personnel facilitated the volunteers contributing to this effort. Overtime compensation was available for this project, as necessary. However, officers contributed the majority of time required to complete analysis, staff work and research.

The Santa Ana Police Department has utilized a problem-solving model to support our community policing philosophy since 1990. For the past seven years, training in problem solving

techniques and methods has been an integral part of our internal training programs and organizational life. Problem solving is an organizational expectation, supported by performance evaluation systems and personnel selection practices.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Michael Foote
Commander, Southcoast Police District
Santa Ana Police Department
60 Civic center Plaza P.O. Box 1981, M-18
Santa Ana, CA 92702
Phone: (714) 245-8763
Fax: (714) 245-8770