

**1998 HERMAN GOLDSTEIN AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE
IN PROBLEM-ORIENTED POLICING**

NOMINEE: Honolulu Police Department
OPERATION SAFE STREETS

From late 1994 through early 1997 the City and County of Honolulu experienced a wave of purse snatching/robberies that rocked our tourist community, which is the economic base of the state, and strained relations between the State of Hawaii and Japan. This crime wave was perpetrated by small groups of local offenders targeting mainly tourists from Japan.

At first these incidents seemed random with no identifiable patterns or traits. Detectives from the Honolulu Police Department (HPD) District 6 Burglary/Theft Detail conducted an analysis of incidents reported between late 1994 and mid 1996. This analysis led to the conclusion that a semi-organized group was responsible for most of the offenses. They sent this information to line personnel and the investigative units. Through active communication and information sharing, the detectives of District 6 could link and identify many members of this criminal enterprise. A picture began to emerge describing possible suspects, areas and times of attack, and methods of operation.

The suspects had coordinated their activity and were linked by family, social, economical and/or geographical relations. The areas of attack were venues frequented by tourists. Connected with the thefts were stolen cars used to facilitate the actual

theft and an escape. Sometimes they stole more than one car for this purpose. The victims typically carried some type of bag (purse, clutch, waist, etc.) which was the object of theft. Finally, the perpetrators used various levels of force in the commission of these crimes. Force ranged from as little as a push and grab to dragging and shoving of victims. Sometimes, victims suffered severe injuries that required hospitalization.

With the publicity on these crimes, there was clearly a danger not only to individual victims but also to the very base of our state's economy, tourism. Law enforcement came under intense scrutiny and criticism from both the public and private sectors. Especially critical was the threat made by the Japanese Consul General in Hawaii to publicly discourage Japanese visitors to Hawaii if we did not address the problem. In addition, these crimes exposed victims, mostly female, elderly and defenseless to the potential of serious injury or even death.

These crimes increased during the early part of 1996, and the administration of the Honolulu Police Department authorized an islandwide effort to address this problem. An operation was set up to deter the commission of these acts and to apprehend the perpetrators. This effort met with limited success. At first there was a slight decrease in these crimes but it exposed another problem. These efforts forced the offenders to change their methods of operation. This led to an expansion of geographic areas of attack and longer and more varying times of occurrence.

While this operation was ongoing, the department also explored the idea of using federal provisions and laws to address this local problem. We had informal communications with the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) regarding this problem. Subsequent discussions between the HPD, the FBI, the United States District Attorney and the Prosecuting Attorney of the City and County of Honolulu were held. We then decided to seek federal prosecution against the offenders as an alternative. In early 1997, based on these discussions, the department and the FBI decided to form a joint task force to address this problem. Both agencies initiated formal introductions and proposals to satisfy jurisdictional protocol. The primary goals of the task force was to reduce or curtail the crime trend and/or to apprehend and successfully prosecute anyone arrested for this crime. The task force, which consisted of five HPD investigators and two FBI special agents came under the supervision of a police lieutenant.

The task force's priority was to compile and analyze all data regarding this problem. A second concern was the analysis of other related investigative information. These two assignments required extensive, labor-intense efforts by the assigned investigators. Within three months of the inception of the task force, investigators examined more than a thousand reports and documents, which were relevant to the investigation. Analysis of the data exposed several details:

- 1) Initially (late 1994), the crimes were sporadic and averaged 1 to 5 incidents a month. By early 1997 the number of cases averaged 2 to 6 incidents a week. Offenses decreased in April 1997 after multiple arrests were made and a search warrant was executed on a suspect's home. In the next several months the crime trend remained low, averaging 2 to 6 incidents a month.
- 2) A semi-organized group of local persons perpetrated most of these criminal acts and usually operated in smaller groups of 2 to 5 people.
- 3) These smaller groups usually used a stolen vehicle or a number of stolen vehicles to facilitate the commission of these crimes.
- 4) The victims always carried on their person some type of bag that was the target of the robberies.
- 5) Usually cash and jewelry were the only valuables of interest to the perpetrators who usually discarded all other valuables.
- 6) The offenders became progressively aggressive as the crime trend continued the potential of serious bodily injuries to the victims increased.

Once the analysis was complete, the task force applied federal guidelines and directives to further the investigations. These jurisdictional parameters dictated the direction and tempo of the investigations. The task force earlier assessed that federal

provisions carried a more severe penalty and that federal guidelines and directives allowed for greater investigative flexibility. Operating under these parameters, the task force identified and ranked culprits' involvement within the group of suspected offenders.

The next step was to research and examine data gathered earlier to decide which documented incidents could be physically connected/attributed to these offenders. This entailed identifying recovered latent fingerprints, conducting photographic lineups with victims and witnesses, and reexamining other recovered evidentiary items. Personnel from the Records Division and the Scientific Investigative Section assisted the task force in the investigative process.

Selected individuals within the identified group were presented with the evidence implicating them. They were also informed of the consequences if they were convicted under federal guidelines. These individuals agreed to cooperate, admitted their criminal involvement and implicated accomplices. After the first group of offenders cooperated with the investigators, we had corroborative information on other suspects. Subsequent investigations resulted in similar agreements to cooperate.

The investigations resulted in 16 people either voluntarily pleading guilty or being indicted on a federal count of conspiracy to commit robbery and connecting multiple counts of robberies. Eventually all 16 pleaded guilty to their respective charges. Sentencing for these people is still ongoing; the

length of the sentences involved federal incarceration anywhere from 26 months (2 years and 2 months) up to 140 months (13 years and 8 months). These sentences reflect the credit received for cooperation. They also received three years of mandatory supervised release by Federal Probation Authorities.

In addition, two individuals have charges pending against them by the United States District Attorney. One person has shown a willingness to cooperate with the task force.

The secondary results of the task force investigations were a marked decrease in purse snatching/robberies and a corresponding decrease in vehicle thefts. Statistical data gathered by the department for 1995, 1996 and 1997 are described in the attached graph (SEE ATTACHMENT #1).

The statistical data confirms the successful efforts of the task force in addressing this problem. Although the task force is already engaged in another identified problem, they still monitor this crime trend to identify any possible resurgence.

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