

Second and Richards: Turning the Tables on Juvenile Offenders



Submitted by Dennis McWherter and Kevin O'Boyle, Patrol Officers
City of Joliet Police Department
150 West Washington
Joliet, IL 60432
815-724-3230 Phone
815-724-3289 Fax

Abstract

The Second and Richards Neighborhood Oriented Policing Team Area was similar to many deteriorated neighborhoods across the country. Once a vibrant, bustling community, the ravages of time and poor economics had changed it into a wasteland of drugs, crime, and apathy on the part of residents. This is the area to which my partner and I were assigned as community policing officers, expected to problem-solve in order to reduce crime, and make the neighborhood a safer place for all residents to live.

We began by talking with residents and conducting many foot and bike patrols. Over time, we started to recognize the unique characteristics of this area, and identify the most pressing issues. We settled on addressing the rampant juvenile crime. Not only were juveniles, mostly gang members, causing much property damage, but they were intimidating residents into remaining passive, and not making repairs to their properties.

Further investigation into the problem revealed that juveniles were not fearful of any repercussions for their behavior because they were mainly sentenced to community service. This sentence did not hold much of a deterrent to them, since many were clever enough to deduct that there were not sufficient monitoring devices in place to ensure that they actually carried out their sentences. The result was a deteriorated neighborhood, apathetic residents, and overly confident teenagers with the license to terrorize the community.

After discussing several options, my partner and I determined that the best method of alleviating this problem would be to supervise juveniles assigned community service in person. This would only involve a limited amount of resources for brooms, rakes and paint, and our time to supervise these youth. In addition, we were able to attain cooperation from all key criminal

justice system representatives to ensure that there would now be consequences for juveniles that failed to complete their sentences.

The program is now in its second year. During the first year, only six juveniles participated in our project, and completed twelve hours each of community service. Even this little bit of work was evident in the community. This year, twenty-five juveniles completed their community service requirements, and an additional twenty-five volunteers assisted them. Plans are being laid to expand the number of clean up sessions that occur each year, and to initiate the program in both other Neighborhood Policing Areas as well as non-Neighborhood Policing Areas.

The City of Joliet is located approximately forty miles southwest of the City of Chicago at the crossroads of two major interstates. The population is comprised of largely working class residents that view their city as self-sufficient, and take pride in working hard. Although the local economy took a serious nosedive in the 1970s, with the introduction of two riverboat gambling facilities and a shift in jobs from manufacturing to service, our size has grown exponentially in the 1990s. Unfortunately, the same qualities that make Joliet a pleasant place to live and attractive to new residents also served as a magnet for gang members from Chicago.

They saw opportunities to expand their territories, and four of the larger organizations recruited members here. The problems that then developed and intensified are certainly not unusual. Cities of all sizes across the country have had varying degrees of difficulty with gang and juvenile activity. In our city, this has ranged from misdemeanors such as vandalism and loitering to much more serious crimes like possession and selling illegal narcotics and violent crimes.

My partner and I are members of our police department's Neighborhood Oriented Policing Team (NOPT). Our regular assignment is to one small area that has been identified through crime statistics to be a hot spot for criminal activity. Rather than participate in regular patrol, we have been specially trained to perform community policing and problem solving techniques on a full-time basis. This particular project was initiated in January of 1997 at the Second and Richards NOPT area.

Once home to the City's elite, the housing stock contains large Victorian homes that have been either subdivided and rented out, or allowed to deteriorate. At one time several successful business lined the streets, and a card factory employed many residents. Today, most have been abandoned and boarded up; the only successful businesses here now are a liquor store and the local drug enterprises. The area's reputation among all city residents was extremely poor. In fact, if a person mentioned that they were planning on making a visit to the area, they would probably be asked whether they would be making this visit during the day.

Considering the devastating state that this area was in, my partner and I saw our assignment as an opportunity to really develop and put into practice our problem-solving skills. Since there were so many actions that needed to be taken, we felt that we should step back and really try to choose projects that would have the maximum impact possible. While conducting foot and bike patrol, and getting to know the community, we were able to identify two distinct issues that seemed to be causing the most immediate problems. The first was cosmetic. Throughout the entire area there was an inordinate amount of debris littering the streets, fronts of homes, vacant lots and buildings, as well as a considerable amount of vandalism of abandoned properties. In addition, residents allowed vegetation to grow out of control, and did not remove graffiti once it was placed on buildings. The result was chaos: the neighborhood was unsightly, residents that did not have any pride in their surroundings, and vandals that felt they could act without fear of any repercussions. Further, the lack of care given to the neighborhood seemed to act as a billboard to criminals that they would have free rein to conduct any activities they chose.

An analysis of service calls revealed that residents make a large number of complaints each year. A sample of three months, April, May and June, of 1997 and 1998 was taken. The

following table illustrates the types of calls that are being made. As will be seen, quite a few nuisance complaints are being made on a regular basis.

Incident	1997	1998	Total
Abandoned vehicle	15	51	66
Alarm	12	9	23
Disturbance	27	35	62
General Nuisance Complaint	18	27	46
Information for Police	11	15	26
Juvenile Nuisance	5	9	14
Miscellaneous Investigative Services	9	5	14
Neighborhood Trouble	3	0	3
Other Public Complaints	14	18	32
Service Other Agency	0	9	9
Special Citizen Service	10	11	21
Suspicious Incident	30	36	66
Suspicious Person	12	23	35
Totals	166	248	414

Source: Police Information Management System, Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 1998

Surveys of residents and community leaders revealed a perceived link to the significant juvenile property crime that regularly occurs in the area. Many respondents felt that the poor condition of the neighborhoods and the refusal of residents to maintain their properties could be blamed on apathy and fear. Apathy was named because many residents eventually recognized

the futility in cleaning a property that soon returned to its original state. In addition, residents feared gang repercussions if they removed graffiti.

My partner and I agreed that this problem had some serious implications for the area. Aesthetic pleasantries aside, property values bottomed out, residents had no pride in the community, and the entire area became a breeding ground for more serious crimes. In addition, juveniles committing these petty crimes were taught that they could exert control over the neighborhood without facing any consequences.

Relying upon the criminal justice system alone did not appear to be ameliorating either the problem itself, or its side effects. In fact, after my partner and I inquired further into what had been done to deter juveniles from vandalizing properties, we learned that the opposite was occurring. Many offenders had in fact been caught and sentenced, mostly to community service. The failure in the system occurred when they were not held accountable to actually complete these hours. Instead, one of three scenarios was taking place:

1. the offender never completed the hours, and was never reprimanded by any judicial entity for failing to do so;
2. the offender would ask to complete the hours at a church where a family member belonged, and arranged to have someone falsify the records;
3. the offender would intimidate social service agency workers to the degree that they were asked not to return.

Whichever scenario took place, offenders learned that they could act as they wished, and the juvenile justice system was no threat to their freedom. In fact, in many cases this knowledge probably bolstered their confidence to a degree where juveniles may have participated in more serious offenses.

Before developing what was to become our final plan of action, several alternatives were discussed between my partner and I. We noticed that many reputed gang members could regularly be found loitering in parking lots and street corners at all hours of the day and night.

We felt that since their strength may be in their size, formal trespass agreements between the Joliet Police Department and local business owners and residents was considered. This involved having parties sign a document allowing the police to arrest any person found loitering on a property when they had no business being there. Unfortunately, due to the relative lack of community involvement and the likelihood that some retaliation by gang members may occur, this solution was determined to be unfeasible.

The second possible solution could have been to hold large sweeps and arrest juveniles on a regular basis that were found loitering. However, since many had no fear of what the juvenile justice system could do to them, it was likely that this would be seen as more of an inconvenience than a deterrent. In addition, we questioned the wisdom of clogging up the court system with a barrage of loitering violations.

Finally, we decided to make the link between juvenile crime and serving assigned community service hours. The plan involved having patrol officers supervise all juveniles assigned community service that resided in the area. Juveniles would then be expected to clean up the neighborhood, including sweeping, raking, picking up debris, and painting over graffiti. Before we could implement the project, however, there were many details that needed to be ironed out, and the cooperation of many different entities would be necessary.

We began by presenting the proposed activities to the Will County Probation Department and the State's Attorney's Office. They seemed pleased that they would be receiving this additional assistance from the police department, but they had concerns about the type of work to be performed, the tools which would be used, and the privacy of juveniles if there was any press coverage.

Several meetings were then convened that involved various City officials, including the City Manager, the Legal Department, as well as court representatives. As a result, several agreements were reached.

- The only tools to be used by juveniles would be hand tools and paint; no power tools would be utilized.
- If any press coverage took place, neither the juveniles' names nor their faces would be included.
- The City Manager approved funds for the equipment that would be used.
- The officers' supervising sergeant agreed to allow them to be free twice a week for two hours a day to supervise the juveniles' activities.
- The Will County Probation Department committed themselves to providing pertinent information about juveniles assigned community service.
- The State's Attorney's Office committed themselves to petitioning juveniles delinquent in their community service activities back to court in a timely manner.
- The presiding judge agreed to sentence juveniles delinquent in their community service duties to time in a juvenile facility.

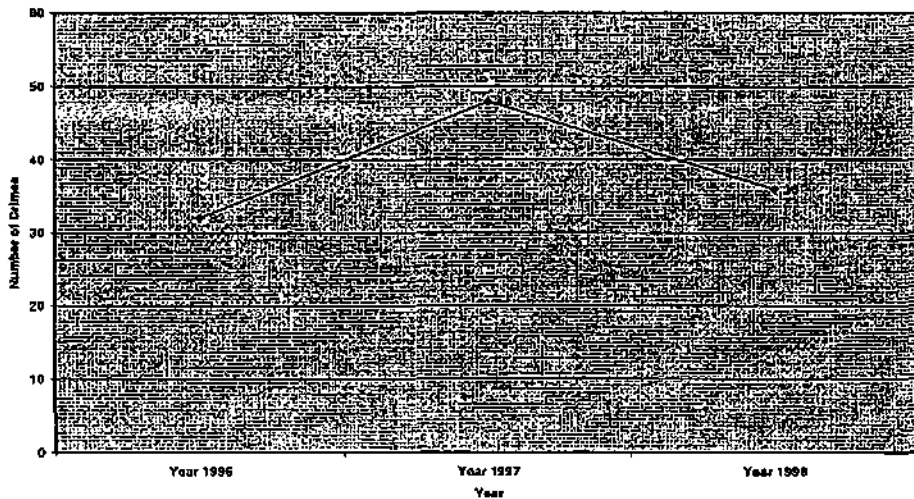
We felt that this project had tremendous potential to deter crime in three distinct ways. First, juveniles forced to serve out community service hours would be embarrassed by being seen in public sweeping the streets and painting walls under the supervision of two uniformed officers. Potential offenders would be alerted to the fact that they would now be expected to complete all community service hours. Finally, offenders would be advised that they would not be forced to fulfill their obligations, but if they did not, the criminal justice system would be holding them accountable.

Being eternal optimists, my partner and I had some additional hopes for this project. We thought that perhaps community members would see that the youth no longer held control over the neighborhood, and a domino effect may begin to take place. Their interest in making further improvement to properties might increase, which in turn could reduce the desirability of the neighborhood in the eyes of criminals. Eventually, businesses may take an interest in expanding into the area, and community members may take complete control of their neighborhood.

The project is now in its second year of implementation. Rather than have community clean ups occur on a regular basis, it was decided that the best approach would be to first attempt to hold them two to three times a year. During the first year, only six juveniles were assigned to the project, and they worked on cleaning up the community six times for approximately two hours each. Even these few hours seemed to make a significant impression on participating juveniles as well as observing community members. Not only did my partner and I receive compliments from residents on our efforts, but also many areas' appearances began to improve. During 1998, several community clean up days were designated, and the participation jumped to twenty-five juveniles and twenty-five volunteers from the local high school.

In terms of crime statistics, there is limited evidence that fewer juvenile crimes are being committed in the area. Taking a sample from April, May and June of 1996, April, May and June of 1997 and April and May of 1998 and utilizing that data to make a yearly estimation of the total juvenile crimes, the following trend emerges.

**Joliet Police Department
Estimated Number of Juvenile Crimes by Year, 1996 to 1998**



As the chart indicates, there was a significant increase in crimes in 1997, but juvenile crime then reverted almost to the 1996 totals in 1998. In addition to this data, the table presented in the beginning of this paper illustrating service calls also provides some evidence that an impact is being made. Since the program has been initiated, service calls have increased tremendously, from a three-month total of one hundred sixty-six in 1997 to an estimated two hundred and forty-eight in 1998. Given that these calls are service-oriented, and for the most part initiated by the resident, it would appear that many have been encouraged to ask the police for assistance with problems that they were not necessarily comfortable with a few years ago.

Immediately after the first year, surveys were distributed both to participants as well as residents whose homes immediately surrounded areas that were cleaned up. The results of both indicate that some of the intended results were achieved. Residents were pleased that some people were showing interest in their community and its appearance. Juveniles felt that the experience was interesting, to say the least. Overall, they seem to feel that the project was valuable.

Plans are being made to expand this project into other NOPT areas across the city as well as to other areas that have not been designated as NOPT areas. In addition, officials from the City's two high schools notified us that all students are required to perform forty hours of community service over their four-year tenure there. Both principals intimated that the project could get additional support from these youth as well.

The success of this project has bolstered both my partner's and my confidence that we are in fact making a difference in the community, and not simply maintaining the status quo. On the other hand, all of the problems that exist in this area have not been eradicated, or even addressed

appropriately. We do feel that this has been a step in the right direction, and are beginning to lay plays to implement other projects beyond the expansion of this one.