

Repairing Neighborhoods with Partnerships

Joliet, Illinois, Police Department

Scanning

Joliet, Illinois, located 45 minutes southwest of Chicago, has a population of 100,000. It is primarily a working class community that endured economic crises in the 1970's and '80's as industry left the city. Joliet's problems intensified with burgeoning gangs and open-air drug markets, especially in the older neighborhoods.

Many of the neighborhoods targeted by police contained a large portion of dilapidated Victorian houses that were owned by absentee landlords. The landlords had divided the houses into small apartments that complied with the minimum inspection standards of the time. As a result, Joliet was replete with low-income rental property. The city contained 74 percent of the Section 8 housing in Will County, but only 21 percent of the population, according to the Joliet Housing Authority. The rental property generally was in neighborhoods rife with gang members and drug dealers.

Analysis

Officers knew that problems associated with rental property had a long history and probably extended beyond the areas targeted by community policing. However, not much more than reactive law enforcement had been tried in the past. A formal analysis of problem-solving efforts between January 1992 and January 1996 confirmed police suspicions: The vast majority of problems involved rental property and over half involved drug or gang activity.

Police analyzed all calls-for-service in 15 target neighborhoods during 18 randomly picked days in 1996. Police received 890 calls-for-service to 297 different addresses. A police study of water bills disclosed that 700 of the calls were to residential property and 137 to commercial property. About 75 percent of the residential property to which officers responded involved rental property.

Response

Rather than continually confront suspects at the rental units, police tried to win the cooperation of landlords. Police believed that landlords could reduce disturbances by screening tenants and evicting problem tenants; however, few landlords cooperated. Then-Sergeant Jim Powers and Officers Bob Blackburn and Jim Scarpetta found that other city departments were frustrated in their efforts to solve problems at the same rental properties.

In response, police in 1997 developed a formal abatement process for dealing with drug, weapon, and nuisance complaints. The officers learned of a city rental inspection ordinance that requires property owners of two or more rental units to pass a maintenance inspection and to maintain a rental inspection certificate for each property. The certificate, which can be revoked for cause, must be renewed every 2 years. For the most part, however, the city enforced certification only in response to complaints from tenants and neighbors.

At police request, the city council passed an ordinance requiring landlords to cooperate with police once they are notified that their property is involved in criminal activity. If landlords fail to cooperate, they can be forced to vacate their property. Police teach landlords to identify problem tenants, to screen prospective tenants, to enforce illegal drug clauses in leases, and to evict problem tenants. Representatives of Neighborhood Services and of fire, zoning and legal departments also participate.

The "intimidation factor"—fear of gang members—often kept law-abiding neighbors from stepping forward. After some success in closing problem property through the hearing process and in gaining the cooperation of landlords, residents became more comfortable cooperating with police, even in gang neighborhoods.

Assessment

The abatement cases had a positive effect on the community by reducing the number of calls-for-service and by increasing the quality of life in the neighborhood.

The first step of the analysis involved a look at 10 percent of each year's abatement caseload from 1997 through 1999. Police also collected calls-for-service for each of the selected addresses for 3 months prior to the opening of the case and for one full year after. Findings indicate that the abatement process had an increasingly positive influence. During 1997, calls for service at four of seven addresses involved in the abatement process decreased immediately. The decreases ranged from 31 percent to 62 percent.

In the second step, police checked calls-for-service in neighborhoods with a high proportion of rental property. Calls in the three target areas had been increasing since 1995, 2 years before the abatement process began. Calls decreased slightly in 1997 and 1998, and significantly in 1999. The data suggest that some intervention occurred in 1999 to stem and then to reverse the upward trend in calls-for-service.

The third step involved a closer look at the types of calls-for-service that decreased. Because the abatement process usually begins in response to an excessive number of disturbance, drug, or weapon calls, police expected a precipitous drop in these calls. Most types increased in the second year of implementation (1998) and then decreased in the third year (1999). One possible explanation could be stronger community support for the abatement process.

The decrease in calls-for-service from 1998 to 1999 is striking, from 22 percent for calls involving violence to 55 percent for calls involving drugs. Disturbance calls decreased by 39 percent.

More significantly, police found decreases in calls-for-service that related to residents' quality of life, such as neighborhood disturbances, property damage, abandoned vehicles, and suspicious incidents. Calls related to battery, weapons, and drug incidents—calls that often prompted abatement actions—declined as well.