

The Set Operation
The Paducah Police Department Goldstein Entry

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“THE SET” OPERATION

Deterring Street Crime and Violence

Paducah Police Department, Paducah, Kentucky, 2006

SUMMARY

SCANNING

During the 1980s, the crack cocaine problem surfaced in Paducah. One area of the city became notorious for the sale and distribution of crack, marijuana and other drugs. The area, commonly known as “The Set,” is located just south of the downtown area and is situated near the McCracken County Courthouse and the McCracken County Regional Jail. Formerly a peaceful area where people would “set” to share tales and life experiences, it evolved into an area where the curbside selling of drugs was commonplace. And along with the drugs came shootings, prostitution, robberies and homicides.

ANALYSIS

The Set was known to be a hub for illegal drug sales and criminal activity in the city of Paducah. Within a two-block area of The Set, there were nearly 400 criminal offenses

reported to police over a 10-year period. Approximately one-fourth of these crimes were violent in nature (murder, assault, rape and robbery). One-fourth of the total were drug offenses.

The Paducah Police Department administration believed, through police reports and information from victims, informants and witnesses, that most of the crimes at The Set were drug and/or alcohol related. The administration also believed that crime at The Set was a significant factor in the city's high crime rate. For example, during a four-year period (2000-2004), the city experienced 17 murders. Five of those (29 percent) were at The Set.

Citizens voiced disapproval with the crime problem at The Set and the perceived inability or inaction on the part of the police to address it. The result was a credibility problem for the police department.

RESPONSE

The Paducah Police Department attacked the problem in two major ways. First, the department's drug enforcement focus shifted to street level activity. Patrol officers and drug detectives made more traffic and *Terry* stops of persons acting suspiciously. Informants were recruited to focus on The Set and to call about "deals in progress." Sting operations were conducted. Completing and disseminating press releases on arrests became a priority. The frequent press releases prompted more citizens to call with more

tips. Officers and detectives responded immediately and made more arrests. Citizens began to realize the Paducah Police Department was turning up the heat on The Set and taking their concerns seriously.

Second, two officers were assigned full-time to The Set. The officers were tasked with intensive law enforcement in a zero-tolerance fashion; maintaining high visibility; encouraging community action through support from churches, community leaders and area residents; and establishing a close working relationship with agencies responsible for activities such as code enforcement. A big portion of their efforts involved the latter. The directed patrol officers worked closely with city and state officials, especially the City of Paducah Inspections Department. Of all the efforts of the directed patrol officers, code enforcement probably had the greatest impact.

ASSESSMENT

Part I Offenses in Paducah are at the lowest level in 15 years. There were no homicides in 2005. The crime rate was down 4.9 percent from the previous year. The period ended with the demolition of “Roney’s,” the last bar in the area of The Set. The property has been “reclaimed” and is now owned by the City of Paducah.

DESCRIPTION

INTRODUCTION

Paducah is the largest city in far western Kentucky. It is also a commercial, medical and entertainment center for southern Illinois, southeast Missouri and northwest Tennessee. The city sits on the I-24 corridor leading to Nashville, St. Louis and Chicago. Its population of 26,000 does not truly reflect its size. Within 50 miles, Paducah serves a population of 250,000. Additionally, Paducah is uniquely situated in the largest “wet” county among many “dry” counties in western Kentucky. These factors present significant challenges for the Paducah Police Department.

SCANNING

The Set has long had a reputation in much of western Kentucky and southern Illinois as a place where drug deals, gambling, shootings, prostitution, robberies and homicides were commonplace. Three establishments contributed to the problem. Each supplied alcohol. One of the establishments, Ray and Loraine’s, is still operating. It is a retail liquor store and caters primarily to drive through and walk up liquor sales. The other two establishments, Jerry and Marjorie’s and Roney’s, were bars that served alcohol on the premises. Since many patrons knew one another, the bars served as social clubs. They lured drinking and drug activity and became known as a place to pick up dates.

A culture prevailed at these bars that was tolerant of patrons becoming intoxicated and disorderly. Prostitutes could sometimes be found. Drug use was common. Officers patrolling the area often found discarded drug paraphernalia in and around the establishments (see Table 1). The establishments were dimly lit and often crowded, especially on the weekends and late at night.

Jerry and Marjorie's had a pool table. Fights sometimes broke out over the games. The establishments failed to adequately monitor drinking and aggressive behavior until it got out of hand and the police had to be called.

From 2000 through 2004, 126 offenses were reported to the Paducah Police Department at these three establishments. Only 10 of these were reported at Ray and Loraine's. One was a murder. Jerry and Marjorie's closed in March 2003. Between 2000 and March 2003, 24 offenses were reported to the police. One of these was a murder. The other 82 offenses were reported at Roney's.

Table 1 shows offense data related to Roney's. The bar's tolerance for intoxication, disorderly conduct and drug use, along with other factors noted above, seemed to contribute to the assaults, drug offenses and other violent acts.

Offense/Report	Assaults	Drug Offenses	Drugs, Weapons, or Evidence Found	Other ¹	Total
Number	17	22	32	11	82

Table 1. Offense related data reported at Roney's, 528 South 7th Street, 2000-2004

In March of 2001, members of the community met with the police and city politicians to discuss the problem. The meeting was seen as a “first step” in a community-police partnership to work toward solutions. One community leader commented that the meeting would be a “benchmark by which we can rate” Randy Bratton, the newly hired chief of police who promised to implement community-policing initiatives to attack the problem.

ANALYSIS

In reviewing offense reports, crime statistics and intelligence gained from arrests and informants, certain factors became evident. First, many of the offenses in the area were drug-related and/or alcohol-related. This was well known and became especially evident when interviewing victims or witnesses to shootings, robberies or other violent crimes. As crack cocaine moved into the area during the late 1980s and early 1990s, violence increased. Robberies often consisted of someone going to The Set to purchase drugs, meeting a potential drug dealer, and being robbed. Shootings and other assaults became less domestic in nature and more related to drugs or drug money. Prostitution emerged and was typically related to bartering sex for drugs or money for drugs.

¹ Includes robbery, weapon offenses, burglary and theft.

Second, many people that came to The Set to purchase drugs were from outside the community. Surveillance, field interview reports and other intelligence showed that many visitors to The Set lived in adjoining counties or were from southern Illinois. The reputation of The Set and its “drive by” drug service had grown and people wanting drugs soon learned that they could just circle through the area in their vehicles and wait to be flagged down by a dealer for a transaction. Seventh Street is the main route through The Set. It is well away from the main traffic routes, making it easy to drive slowly through and to observe for drug dealers. Yet, the area of The Set is a few blocks from downtown and the McCracken County Courthouse, making it easy to locate.

Third, most offenses occurred during the evening hours when people patronized the bars and tended to congregate in the area. By city ordinance, bars in Paducah can remain open until 3:00 a.m. Additionally, no regulations exist that prohibit patrons from leaving and re-entering a bar. Therefore, many patrons could leave, go to another bar, and return. To compound the problem, many intoxicated patrons would linger outside the bars after closing until almost daylight. Eighty-seven percent of the assaults in Table 1 occurred between the hours of 9:00 p.m. and 4:00 a.m. These were the hours when the bars at The Set were the most active and included an hour after they closed.

Fourth, the enforcement of drug-related offenses, including possession and trafficking, was hampered by the ability of offenders to escape notice by police and disappear inside the bars at The Set. Roney’s was especially problematic for the police. It was common

for officers to spot and approach a suspected drug dealer and have the dealer escape by running inside Roney's, flushing the drugs and evidence, and escaping out the back door or becoming lost in the crowd. As Table 1 indicates, drugs and related paraphernalia, including syringes, were frequently found inside the business. They were found stashed in the bathroom, booths and other parts of the business.

The owner of Roney's was complicit in the problem by providing a haven for the offenders. He was never "uncooperative," but he was never really "cooperative." His profits were tied to the crowds that patronized his business. Many in the crowds were involved with drugs and/or drug trafficking. In community policing terms, the owner of Roney's was considered a "guardian" of the offenders. It was clear that to resolve the problems associated with The Set, "business as usual" at Roney's had to stop.

RESPONSE

INITIAL EFFORTS

Prior to 2001, the Paducah police response to the problems at The Set was primarily reactive in nature. Generally, patrol officers were directed to focus on The Set during times when large numbers of people congregated in the area. Officers were instructed to try to break up the crowds and disperse them to other places. Oftentimes, there was little police presence until they were called to a fight, crime in progress, or other problem.

Drug enforcement consisted mainly of long-term covert drug operations and a rare “buy-bust” operation.

Beginning in 2001, the Drug and Vice Enforcement (DAVE) Unit began to focus most of its activities and enforcement efforts on The Set. Coupled with a community policing strategy aimed at gathering community support and information from around The Set, the DAVE Unit conducted more street level enforcement activities and conducted major sting operations in the area.

During the sting operations, police officers replaced the sellers on the streets and began to make sales of “crack cocaine.” The “crack” sold by officers was actually wax laced with trace amounts of cocaine. These sales were made to buyers driving through the area looking for crack. The buyers were immediately arrested. It was learned that many of the arrested buyers were from other counties in western Kentucky and southern Illinois.

The television, radio and print media accompanied police on these stings. Media coverage showed several arrests and warned potential buyers of possible arrests if they came to Paducah for drugs. The reaction from the community was very positive as they watched the department aggressively attacking the area’s drug and crime problem.

The initial sting operations were manpower intensive and expensive in terms of salaries and overtime. During the summer of 2002, smaller “street level narcotics teams” were developed. They consisted of patrol officers and detectives organized to conduct stings

on a smaller, but more frequent, scale. The officers received special training in drug enforcement and search and seizure. The smaller stings were as effective as the larger stings but could be conducted more frequently. They involved less cost and less planning.

Officers also conducted *Terry* stops, when appropriate, and “jump outs” on suspected drug dealers in an effort to make drug possession arrests. “Jump outs” resulted from surveillance or tips of suspected drug transactions. Generally, officers would “jump out” of their vehicles and rapidly approach the suspected dealers. The dealers would often flee and discard their drugs. If officers could stop the dealers and find drugs in their possession or could associate discarded drugs with the suspects, then drug possession arrests could be made. Surveillance cameras were installed to assist in these operations.

Smaller stings and the efforts of the street level narcotics teams had a greater overall effect on the problem. More arrests were made (see Figure 1). When arrests could not be made, stashed or discarded drugs were confiscated in hopes of raising the cost associated with dealing drugs and making the area less appealing for dealers.

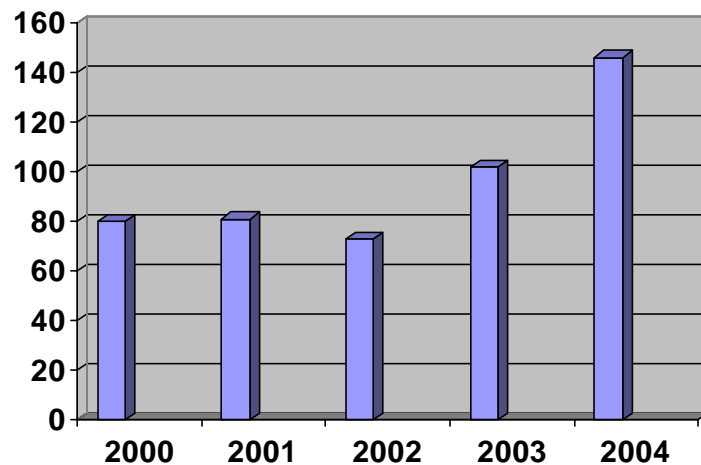


Figure 1. Drug Arrests for Zone 2 (includes Set).

Aggressive drug enforcement was conducted in partnership with the community. Community support and information often led to intelligence for planning enforcement activities. Occasionally, businesses provided support by allowing the police to utilize their premises to conduct surveillance and other activities. Other community partners, such as local automobile dealers and utility companies, provided vehicles and equipment that were utilized in the operations.

An aggressive media relations campaign produced frequent stories on drug arrests. The community began to see that the police were taking their concerns seriously. Calls from citizens increased, leading to even more arrests. Tips to a telephone hotline known as “Crime Stoppers” increased during this period (See Figure 2). Press releases always acknowledged and gave the community credit for its support in the enforcement actions. In partnership with the community, the efforts of the police began to pay dividends.

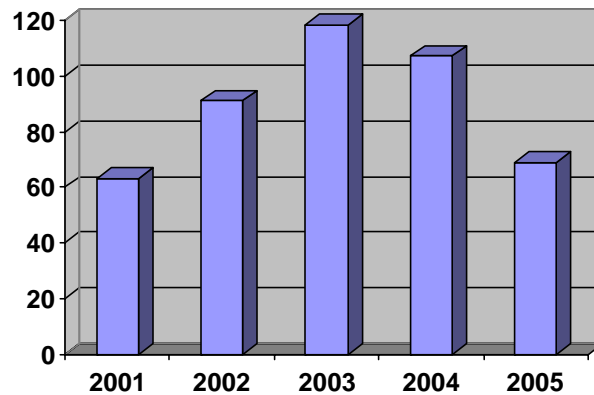


Figure 2. Crime Stoppers Narcotics Tips

DIRECTED PATROL

It wasn't until the department began utilizing a directed patrol strategy, coupled with more intensive efforts aimed at partnering with other public agencies, that real success was realized. The focus of the operation began to expand not only to drug related offenses, but also to policing crowds and the establishments in the area, particularly Roney's.

During the fall of 2004, two officers were pulled from patrol shifts to form a directed patrol unit. Most of their patrols were conducted on bicycles. They were geographically assigned to The Set and nearby areas. They were directed to:

1. Enforce the law intensively in a zero-tolerance fashion
2. Maintain high visibility
3. Utilize surveillance equipment when appropriate

4. Encourage community action and gain support of the community through meetings with church leaders and area residents
5. Establish a working relationship with agencies having an indirect involvement, such as code enforcement
6. Meet with various city officials to inform them of action plans

The directed patrol officers adjusted their work hours to accommodate these duties. At night, they made drug, alcohol and other related arrests. During the day, they met with city officials, citizens and members of various public agencies. A typical night might include bicycle patrol where the officers caught persons in possession of crack cocaine and marijuana. A typical day might include a meeting with the City of Paducah Code Enforcement Division regarding building code violations. As a result of their enforcement efforts, annual drug arrests increased significantly in 2004 over the four previous years (see Figure 1 above).

There was little to no code enforcement prior to 2004. There had been limited to no partnering with other agencies such as the Kentucky Alcohol Beverage Control Department, the McCracken County Health Department, the United States Internal Revenue Service and the Revenue Cabinet of Kentucky.

For unspecified reasons, the owner of Jerry and Marjorie's closed his business in March of 2003. The directed patrol focus shifted to Roney's. The officers were suspicious of the owner's business dealings and contacted agents of the United States Internal Revenue

Service and the Kentucky Revenue Cabinet. Officials of the Kentucky Revenue Cabinet determined that the owner of Roney's owed \$20,000 in delinquent taxes. This, coupled with expenses related to code enforcement violations, placed a tremendous financial burden on the business.

When directed patrol officers visited the business, they noted filth in the kitchen area. They contacted the City of Paducah Inspection Department and arranged a meeting with the director, Joel Scarbrough. They also arranged meetings with officials of the McCracken County Health Department. Problems relating to Roney's were discussed. Subsequent inspections were arranged.

Roney's primary business function involved the sale of alcohol. The directed patrol officers contacted and developed a working relationship with Agent Gary Johnson of the Kentucky Alcoholic Beverage Control Department (ABC). Agent Johnson taught the officers about alcohol enforcement as it related to businesses. The officers became adept at spotting state ABC violations.

In October 2004, four agencies combined to conduct a surprise inspection of the property at Roney's. The agencies included the directed patrol officers of the Paducah Police Department, the Kentucky ABC, the McCracken County Health Department and the Paducah Inspection Department. The joint inspection resulted in several violations and the business was closed for two days by the health department.

Fines accrued as a result of these and other violations. The directed patrol officers learned through their contact with Agent Gary Johnson that Roney's liquor license pertained only to the sale of beer. The officers then began to look for hard liquor items. When these items were found, additional fines were levied.

The directed patrol officers considered fire-code enforcement as a viable option to dealing with the alcohol establishments at The Set. They met with the Paducah city fire marshal and learned about fire codes and common violations. During their enforcement efforts at The Set, they were vigilant for fire code violations.

An important partnership evolved between the officers and area churches. The officers met with Reverend Ricky Jones of the Church of God's Ministries and later with officials of the West Union Baptist Association. Reverend Jones owned property in the area. These meetings resulted in enhanced community support for enforcement actions. For example, a "prayer chain" developed involving 10 people from each of the 48 churches within the West Union Baptist Association. The prayers were for the safety of the officers while they were involved in the operation. Both directed patrol officers, Officer Matt Smith and Officer Jody Higdon, said the feeling derived from this type of support was very motivational.

In August 2005, after several citations and repeated attempts to have the property owner correct code enforcement problems, the property at Roney's was condemned and ordered closed. A month later, the City of Paducah purchased the property. The business was later

torn down. *The Paducah Sun*, the daily newspaper in Paducah, reported the demolition in February 2006 and noted it coincided with a significant drop in the city's crime rate. The space has been "reclaimed" and is ready to be utilized for more legitimate uses.

ASSESSMENT

In 2001, the management of the Paducah Police Department established a clear goal of focusing on violent crime at The Set. Beginning in 2001, the main response was to increase drug enforcement in the area. It wasn't until 2004 that efforts at partnering with other public agencies became a priority. The primary focus shifted to Roney's. After tougher enforcement and the eventual closure of the business, drug dealers had no protected place from which to perpetrate their crimes. Fewer and fewer dealers visited the area. It became obvious crime in the area was "drying up." The Set became less attractive for activities for which it was formerly associated.

An examination of the number of calls for service generated by activity at The Set provides a means for evaluating the effectiveness of strategies implemented in 2004. Figure 3 highlights the annual calls for service for The Set for the years 2000 through 2005. There was a significant decrease (57 percent) in the calls for service in 2005 (88) as compared to 2004 (205). This decrease far exceeds the citywide decrease of 3 percent (48,275 in 2004 and 47,091 in 2005). There was also a significant decrease (53 percent) when comparing The Set calls for service in 2005 with the average for the previous five years (202).

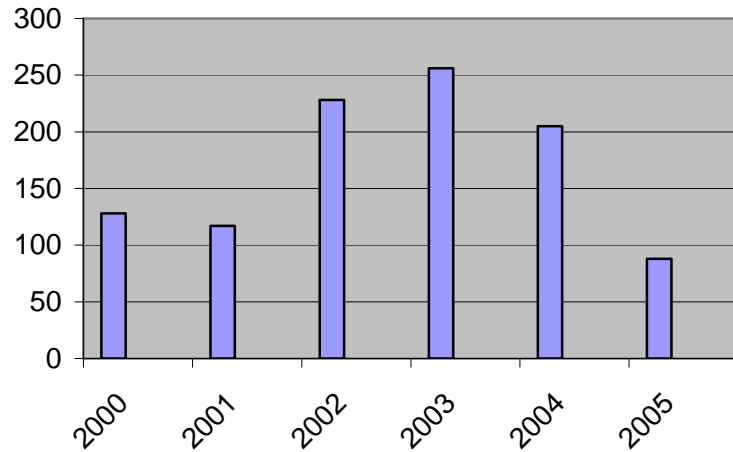


Figure 3. Calls for Service at The Set

Perhaps the most impressive statistic is that only 24 calls for service were received from July 1, 2005, through December 31, 2005. This coincides with the increased pressure by the directed patrol officers placed on Roney's, leading to its eventual closure in August 2005. And perhaps even more significant is the number of calls for service at The Set from January 1, 2006, through April 30, 2006. There were only eight.

From 2004 to 2005, there was a 43 percent reduction in violent crime in the area of The Set. Figure 4 shows violent crime reported for the city. Overall, Paducah's violent crime was down 30 percent from 2004 to 2005. It is believed that a reduction in crime at The Set affected the overall crime rate in the city.

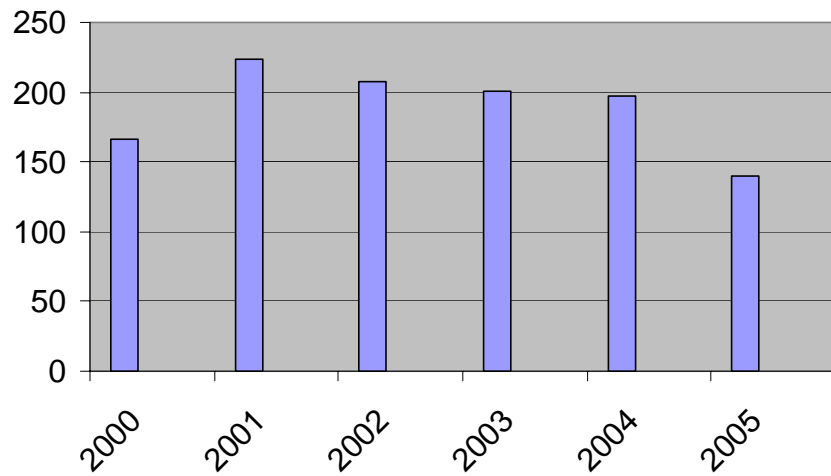


Figure 4. Violent Crime for City of Paducah

Offenses reported at Roney's contributed significantly to the crime at The Set. Crime reported at Roney's from 2000 through 2004 (82) constitutes approximately 52 percent of all offenses (157) reported in a central one-block area (500 block of South 7th Street) of The Set. Perhaps the most telling statistic is that since the closure of Roney's in August 2005, only two offenses were reported for the same area (9/1/05 through 4/30/06). Today, one has merely to drive through the area and notice the obvious change. An area formerly noted for alcohol and drug use is now quiet and practically crime free.

CONCLUSION

The Paducah Police Department has learned several things from the initiatives described in this article. First, traditional methods of policing do not always work. Attacking the same problems with the same methods often yields the same results. Drug enforcement alone could not reverse the trend of crack and drug related problems at The Set. The traditional methods of working informants and using routine preventive patrol strategies were not sufficient for the task. Aggressive street level enforcement and working both ends of the “seller-buyer equation” were needed. And, partnering with the community and other public agencies was essential.

Community policing set the stage for these initiatives by developing a line of communication and a working relationship with area residents. Officers enlisted the help of the community in its efforts by getting out of their vehicles and moving into the neighborhoods to talk with and listen to residents. The department later relied heavily on these lines of communication, resources and support in developing strategies and plans of action to attack the problems.

Constant focusing on the problem and reassessing methods of attack through problem-oriented policing were vital in getting the target area under control. One sting or one operation would dry the area up for several days. However, the result was not long lasting. It was not until the department began to utilize the street level narcotics teams

and the directed patrol units, coupled with assistance from a variety of other agencies, that the problems seemed to erode.

The crime rate has fallen in Paducah, in part, because the department has partnered with various segments of the community. We are working more closely with the community than ever before to implement new and innovative methods to attack old problems. And while we feel we have been successful, we realize that these problems will never completely disappear. Therefore, we will have to be vigilant in our identification, response and assessment of problems, and be relentless in our endeavors to solve them.

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