

# TELEMASP BULLETIN

## TEXAS LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE STATISTICS PROGRAM

February 1997

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### The San Antonio Youth Firearms Violence Initiative

#### Introduction

This bulletin examines an innovative program in progress in San Antonio to reduce violent crime by targeting youth possession of firearms. It details the activities and results to date of a Weapons Recovery and Tracking (WRAT) team which implements focused intervention measures to identify and confiscate firearms in the possession of young men and women. The goal of this program is to reduce youth-involved firearm-related crimes.

#### Background

Ownership, possession and use of firearms by youth under the age of 24 appears to be one of the major contributors to an increase in violent crime in the United States in the last five years. According to a 1994 study in Virginia,<sup>1</sup> juvenile offenders are more likely to possess firearms, with youth reporting having carried firearms more than twice as often as adults. Additionally, other research indicates that more than half of all serious juvenile offenders (in a four state study<sup>2</sup>) report carrying a firearm "most" or "all" of the time.

Evidence is mounting that an increase in firearms availability among youth in the United States is fueling the increased rate of violent crime, particularly in our inner-city areas.<sup>3</sup> Two things are clear. First, most homicides are committed with firearms, nearly three-fourths of all homicides in one study showing a firearm as the murder weapon.<sup>4</sup> Second, young people seem more willing to carry firearms than adults.<sup>5</sup> Further, it seems that firearm-related crime demonstrates a tendency to coalesce geographically into "hot spots."<sup>6</sup>

Though homicides declined in 1994 in San Antonio, gang activity and associated youth violence remain a significant problem. Twenty-four percent of the 194 homicides in 1994 were related to gang activity. San Antonio has several hundred youth gangs. According to the San Antonio Police Department's Youth Crime Detail, there are almost 5,500 gang members in the city, 80 percent of whom are over the age of 16. (Some gang members are in their early 20s.) While overall crime in San Antonio has been on the decline, there has been a steady increase in the number of juveniles arrested for violent crimes, up 317 percent between 1987 and 1994. Furthermore, the number of youths arrested with unlawful weapons went up over 200 percent during that time period. Neighborhoods with particularly high crime rates are in the east, west, and southwest sides of the city.

Police believe that gang guns are mostly to be found in houses, taken out only when needed for a drive-by shooting. Thus, the police are inclined to emphasize obtaining and serving search warrants as much as possible. Lt. Jim Herring, the commander of Special Operations for SAPD, related two incidents. In one case, three SKS assault rifles were taken from a gang member during a warrant search. The person who had the weapons later complained that he had to repay his gang's treasurer \$200 per weapon to compensate for their loss. In another incident, a cache of 15 weapons were seized in a search. The violent gang activity in that sector immediately dropped significantly. This seems to reinforce the concept that the gang owns many weapons which are stored until they are needed for gang activities.

The San Antonio Police Department Youth Firearm Violence Initiative was designed with one question in mind. "Can the police reduce actual crime, fear of crime, and improve quality-of-life issues related to youth and firearm-involved criminal activities by focusing on specific gun crime-related areas with a variety of interventive enforcement and prevention tactics?"

## Operations

An analysis of crime patterns in San Antonio was conducted, and the top 50 "hot spots" were identified where youth-involved firearm-related crimes occurred. Four areas were selected for a trial implementation of the aggressive program, begun on March 1, 1996 (see map). These four areas were carefully selected to provide a similar mix of industrial, business, residential, and housing project composition, as well as being areas in which firearm-related violence had been documented.

Each four weeks the WRAT teams begin a new rotation through the target areas using a different tactic. Throughout the run of the trial program, each area will have been subjected to each tactic at least once. An ongoing program of effectiveness analysis is used to determine which intervention strategy works best. For comparison purposes, information concerning arrests made and weapons confiscated are also kept on one "hot spot" not targeted by the WRAT teams. The four WRAT strategies are:

*Directed Patrol/Warrant Services:* Identifying and serving outstanding warrants on criminals known to have relationships with youth gangs. Deployed Tuesday night through Saturday night, 4 PM to midnight, the WRAT team consists of four patrol officers, four detectives, and one sergeant. The focus is on specific individuals and locations, based on information provided by the Youth Crime Detail which relates to gang members and gang houses within a target area. Although the Youth Crime Detail provides information on gang parties and potential drive-by shootings, most warrants are derived from information received by detectives from their confidential informants.

*Saturation Patrol:* Extra patrol units deployed Tuesday night through Saturday night, 4 PM to midnight. This is an additional police presence in "hot spots" as an on-scene deterrent and arrest force. WRAT officers concentrate on car stops and person checks.

*Knock and Talk Interviews:* Using information on youth gang members provided by the Youth Crime Detail and patrol officers, WRAT members visit the homes of known or suspected gang members. Operating Monday through Friday, 9 AM to 3 PM, they speak with the parents about their child's gang activities and ask for a consent search of the

child's room to recover any firearms there. This team consists of two patrol officers and one sergeant.

*Bar Checks:* Vice and code violation checks at regulated businesses serving alcoholic beverages. Teams are deployed Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights 7 PM to 3 AM, with two teams, consisting of about 25 officers, drawn from patrol officers and vice/narcotics detectives. Selected bars are targeted, based on information from Vice/Narcotics and the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Control Agency.

A number of tactics are employed among the four strategies. They include serving warrants on known criminals, conducting traffic stops and vehicle searches, implementing sting operations, using a rolling surveillance technique, and using a radio direction finder that can be hidden in the vehicle of a suspected illicit weapons dealer to track the vehicle.

Generally, the WRAT team works in conjunction with the Street Crime Arrest Team (SCAT), but focuses on youth-involved firearm-related crime. All the WRAT officers are paid through overtime funds. Although the police union contract forbids using the same officers at all times, careful selection of officers based on surveillance training and other factors enables the police managers to maintain some continuity. In practice, officers who have proven productive are most often selected for continuing WRAT operations.

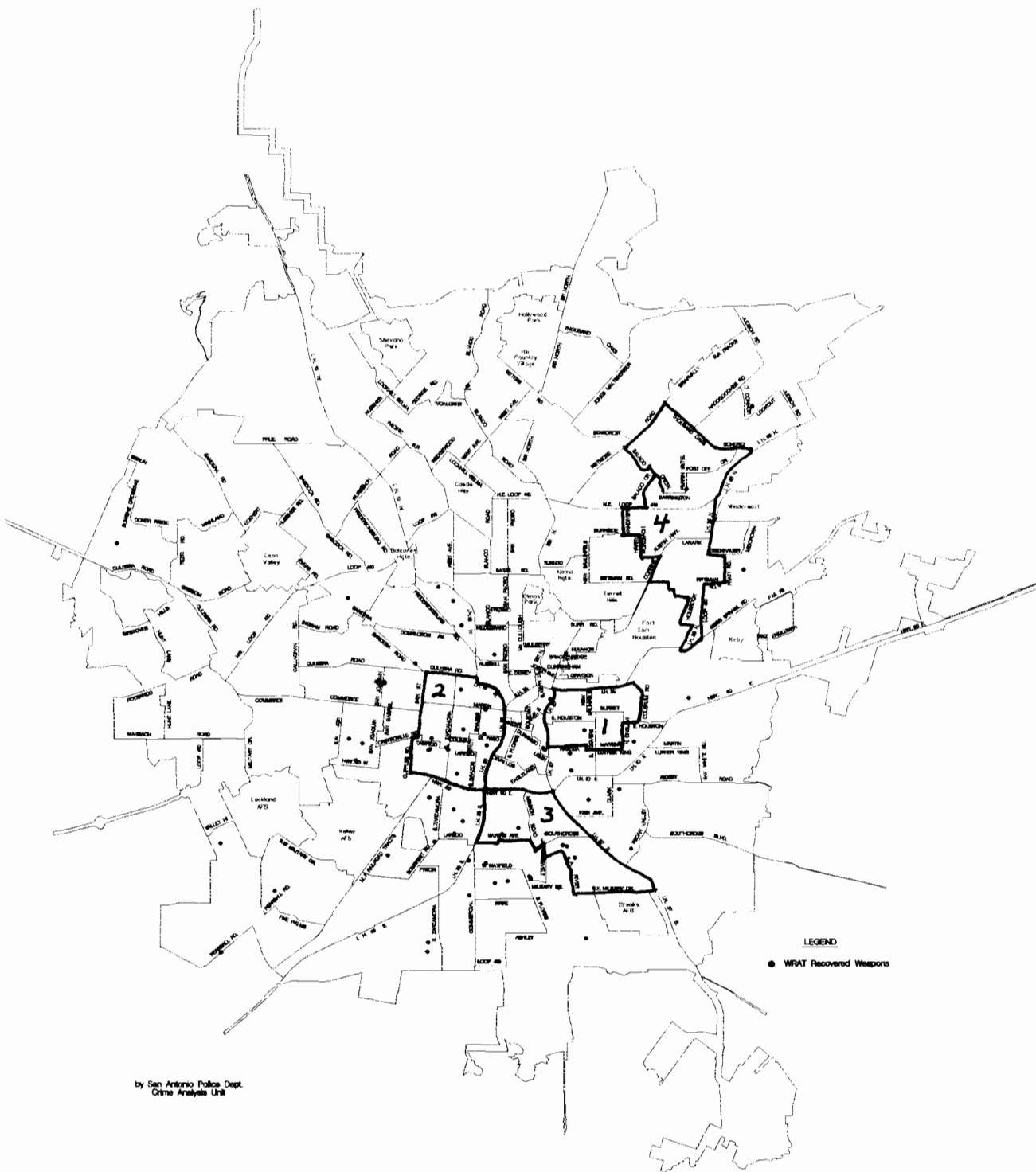
## Empirical Evaluation

To determine program effectiveness, several measures are used.

1. *Youth-involved firearm-related crime:* This is measured by calculating the rate per 1,000 residents for youth-involved firearm-related crime reported to the police. The information is drawn from police files. Changes in the rate of incidents—not the actual number of offenses committed—are used to determine if any of the tactics employed are effective.
2. *Firearm recovery measures:* This is a calculation of recoveries of weapons per 100 person-hours worked, using the experimental tactics. A separate list is kept of the number of weapons recovered as a result of a particular tactic, so an evaluation of the relative effectiveness of the tactics can be made.
3. *Fear of crime measures:* This is done by a survey of residents which was administered before the program began and comparing it to the results of a similar survey done after the program ends. In this manner, the evaluators can determine if there has been any reduction in the fear of crime by the residents in the targeted areas.



# Target Areas



by San Antonio Police Dept.  
Crime Analysis Unit



4. *Quality-of-life measures:* This factor also is measured by pre and posttest surveys. The basic question is whether the residents perceive that there is less youth-involved firearm-related crime in their neighborhoods, and if so, how that has affected their lives.

Overall, program evaluations are being conducted by a research team from St. Mary's University in San Antonio and will not be completed until after the experimental project has ended. Data in this bulletin are from an interim report, based on current statistical data and observations.

### Effectiveness

The interim analysis of the program's operational effectiveness was conducted in March 1996. The interim evaluation, while not conclusive, showed the potential benefits of the aggressive tactics. Between November 4, 1995 and November 30, 1996, WRAT had recovered 252 firearms, representing 18.4 percent of the entire department's firearm recoveries in that period (see Weapons Recovery and Tracking chart).

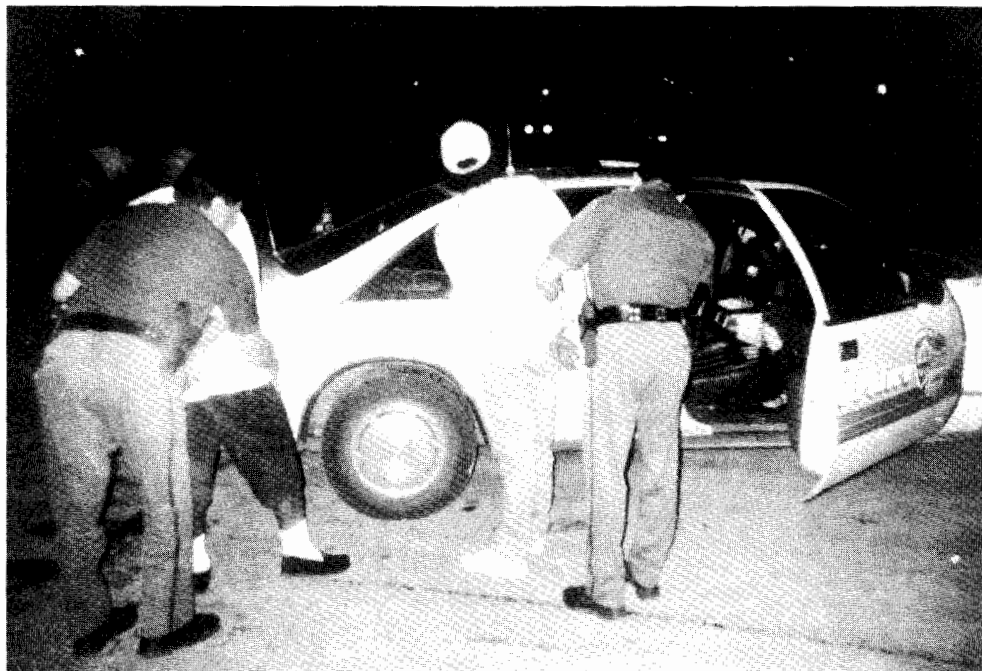
Although it would be inappropriate to claim a direct cause-effect relationship in this stage of the program, during the first quarter of 1996, there were 26 homicides compared to 46 during the first quarter of 1995.

One strategy which has not been cost effective is the bar checks. Few bar patrons seem to carry their guns onto the

premises. Police managers found that they had to commit 30 to 80 officers to a bar check to control potentially volatile situations. The results in weapons recovered were minimal, and there were several assaults on officers. Because of an unbalanced cost/benefit analysis, this tactic was dropped by the police department.

The most productive WRAT activity is serving search warrants. Most of these have been drug-related and based on informant information. The WRAT becomes involved when the informant claims that a weapon has been seen in the location to be searched, or that the person targeted has claimed he has a weapon. It appears that gangs are becoming heavily involved in drug trafficking as a primary source of revenue. Weapons are used as a corollary to the drugs—both for security and as a visible part of the macho drug culture. In one case, a Knock and Talk team visited a residence during the day, spoke to the parents, then obtained a consent search of the gang member's room. No weapons were found. Later that evening, another component of the WRAT came to the residence on a directed search. Using information provided by an informant, they searched under the house and recovered gang weapons hidden there. Although the tactic was effective, procedures have been initiated to improve coordination between different components of the WRAT to prevent the appearance of harassment by returning to the same address too often.

The Knock and Talk process has produced good results in an unexpected direction. The police have found it to be a good



An Effective WRAT Strategy Is Warrant Checks



## Weapons Recovery And Tracking

11/4/95 through 11/30/96

Firearms	
STOLEN FIREARMS RECOVERED BY SAPD	20
STOLEN FIREARMS RECOVERED BY WRAT	5
TOTAL FIREARMS RECOVERED BY SAPD	1,369
TOTAL FIREARMS RECOVERED BY WRAT	252

WRAT Initiated Arrests	
CURFEW VIOLATIONS	39
DWI	7
FELONY	226
FELONY (YOUTH)	83
MISDEMEANOR (YOUTH)	341

WR.AT Warrants Executed/Cleared	
FELONY	76
FELONY WARRANT ARRESTS	66
FELONY WARRANT ARRESTS (YOUTH)	35
MISDEMEANOR	2,735
MISDEMEANOR WARRANT ARRESTS (YOUTH)	271
SEARCH	90

WRAT Citations Issued	
HAZARDOUS	727
NON-HAZARDOUS	1,851
WARNING	128

WRAT Reports Written	
ACCIDENT	2
DWI	1
FIELD INTERVIEW SHEETS	1,030
GANG DATA SHEETS	247
INCIDENT	1,067
OFFENSE	514

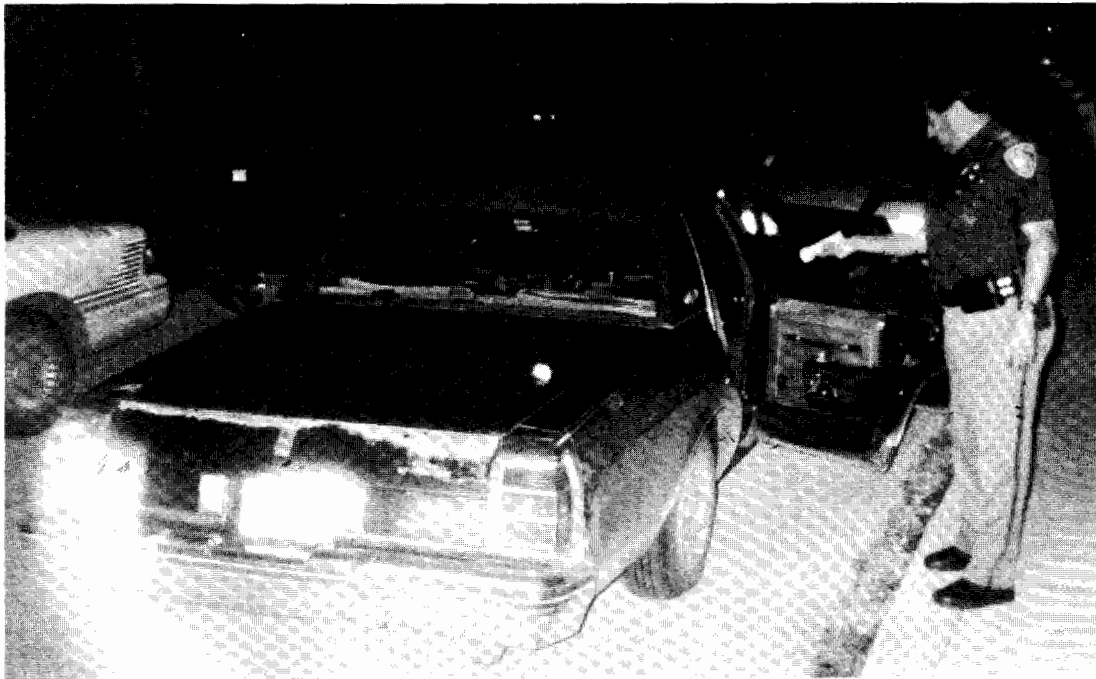
WRAT Miscellaneous	
SURVEYS	175

\*Youth=Persons under 24 years of age.  
 \*\*Initiated arrests do not include warrant arrests.

police/citizen contact which has paid off in closer ties between officers and the community. When a Knock and Talk visit begins, the parents are advised that their child is a gang member and then the officers discuss ways to help the parents. A listing of available social services and organizations is given to the parents to help them in dealing with their child. As a part of the Knock and Talk, parents are assured that if a weapon is found, it will simply be confiscated and no charges will be filed. The exception to this is, of course, if ballistics later confirm that the weapon has been used in a shooting, then prosecution proceeds as normal. According to SAPD officials, not many weapons have been recovered, but the program has opened solid lines of communication with gang members' parents.

Overall, the WRAT activity has produced visible results. The SAPD has identified several alternate treatment areas adjacent to the formal experimental areas so that crime displacement can be measured. According to officers, when an area is selected for application of a tactic, the streets become clear after a short time. By the third week, there are few groups congregating on the streets after midnight. Aggressive police activity not only produces many arrests and weapons recoveries, but appears to drive the criminals out of the areas.

*The author accompanied two experienced San Antonio patrol officers, "Rocky" Romero and Alberto Chevera, on a shift of saturation patrol in Sector 2 on the evening of December 5, 1996. The WRAT for that evening consisted of one supervisor and 10 patrol officers in six patrol vehicles. Activities consisted of aggressive license checks for warrants on all vehicles observed and identity checks on suspicious persons. A typical contact was one WRAT car stopping a vehicle which had committed a traffic infraction, or stopping a group of idlers, then checking the identities of all persons contacted through the central computer system for wants and warrants. In a single seven-hour shift (4-11 PM), the WRAT made two felony arrests and 11 misdemeanor arrests. They arrested persons on one felony warrant and five misdemeanor warrants. Six traffic citations were written for hazardous traffic violations and 25 for non-hazardous traffic violations. A total of 32 vehicles were stopped and checked. The highlight of the evening was when a driver left his car running in the road and fled on foot when being stopped for a failure to wear a seatbelt citation. A foot chase ensued for about six blocks before the driver was captured in a drainage ditch. A check of his vehicle revealed 15 grams of crack cocaine in the driver's floorboard, packaged for sale in 2-rock packets. Although many people were stopped, checked, and given Terry frisks for weapons, no illegally carried firearms were found by WRAT this shift. One weapon was recovered during a drug arrest by the Street Crimes Arrest Team (SCAT) which was operating in conjunction with the WRAT.*



**Saturation Patrol Includes Numerous Vehicle Stops**



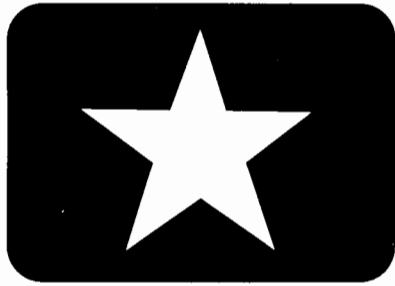
### **The COPS & DOCS Program**

Although state laws require hospitals to notify the police whenever a gunshot victim is treated, the SAPD managers became concerned when they read a study conducted in Atlanta which showed that as many as 10 percent of the shooting victims treated at hospitals are not reported to the police. SAPD was faced with a dilemma since two of the city's three major trauma centers are military hospitals which do not fall under state mandatory reporting guidelines. To solve this problem, SAPD coordinated efforts with Wilford Hall Hospital on Lackland Air Force Base, Brooks Army Medical Center on Fort Sam Houston and the county hospital—University Hospital. A survey at those locations showed that only 5-7 percent of the shooting victims were not being reported to the police. To counter this loss, the COPS & DOCS program was created. The program uses FAX machines to maintain communications by using simple forms which were devised for both the medical staffs and the police. When a shooting occurs with a missing person who could be injured, the police FAX a Be On the Look Out (BOLO) form to the hospitals which describes the injured person (if known) and tells in which part of the body the person was possibly shot. When a person with a gunshot injury comes to a hospital, the hospital staff FAXes a report to the SAPD which lists the injury information and a brief description of the patient. If the injured person is known to the police no action is taken. However, if the hospital report does not match up with a police report, a patrol is sent to the hospital to contact the injured person. This program has operated smoothly and has resulted in the identification and arrest of persons involved in gang firearms violence.

### **NOTES**

1. Criminal Justice Research Center. 1994. *Guns and Violent Crime*. Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Criminal Justice Services (January).
2. Sheley, J., and J. Wright. 1993. "Gun Acquisition and Possession in Selected Juvenile Samples." *Research in Brief*. National Institute of Justice and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (December).
3. MacDowall, D. 1991. "Firearms Availability and Homicide Rates in Detroit, 1951-1986." *Social Forces* 69:1085-1101.
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5. Sheley and Wright, 1993.
6. Sherman, L., W. Shaw, and D. Rogan. 1995. *The Kansas City Gun Experiment*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice.

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