

# OTAY RIVER VALLEY

## CLEANING UP CRIME AND DISORDER IN A RIVER VALLEY

SAN DIEGO POLICE DEPARTMENT, CALIFORNIA, 1995

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- THE PROBLEM:** Businesses inside and surrounding the Otay River Valley suffered burglaries, thefts, and vandalism. Illegal dumping in the river valley also contributed to an environmental problem as tons of trash and debris accumulated in this area. In September of 1993, two homicides occurred in the Otay River Valley. The victims of which were two young boys. This prompted an outcry from the community.
- ANALYSIS:** After running crime analysis data for the area, it was discovered that many of the suspects committing these crimes were transients that were living in the river valley. Traditionally, officers would respond to investigate crimes with little knowledge of the area or it's illegal inhabitants. Many of these crimes often went unsolved. Due to calls for service, the patrol officers rarely had time to meet with business/property owners in order to find out what their problems were and gain their cooperation.
- RESPONSE:** Transients were given trespass notices, ordered to vacate the grounds, and provided with information on homeless shelters in the area. Approximately 200 volunteers from several organizations picked up sixty-eight tons of trash and cleaned up the campsites.
- ASSESSMENT:** Crime analysis of this area has shown a decrease in criminal activity in and around the Otay River Valley. In addition, the quality of life in the River Valley has significantly increased. One can now walk through the Otay River Valley and enjoy the outdoors.
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### INTRODUCTION

Imagine firing up a POP project that would require approval of the Coastal Commission and would cover 8,000 acres of almost inaccessible land dead in the middle of a booming urban area. A project which would pit public safety against environmental concerns and where getting anything done required massive effort by private landowners and the cooperation of a truckload of local, state, and federal agencies.

A project which would have its roots in police work begun in the 1970s and which would begin in earnest in late 1991, finishing up scarcely five weeks

ago, tens of thousands of officer- and citizen-hours later.

Such is the Otay Valley River Bottom Project, perhaps unique in problem-oriented Policing and so vast in scale that it has been called, with apologies to the demented dictator of the Mideast, "the mother of all POP projects."

This effort takes in the Otay River Valley, lying between the 1-805 freeway and 600 Saturn Boulevard in South Bay, bordered on the north by Main Street, Chula Vista, and on the south by Palm Avenue, San Diego.

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Living in the dense underbrush of the riverbed, tweakers, trainliners, runaways, fugitives, petty thieves, the mentally unstable, and others in the legion of the walking weird ventured out to steal, assault, and buy and sell drugs. Then, like phantoms disappearing into the mist, they slipped back to their homes in scrubland so forbidding that passage was often dangerous and camps could not be seen two feet away through thick reeds and grasses.

To the frustration of officers from both cities' police departments—and of residents and owners of businesses, which surround the riverbed—the valley had become an increasingly popular “home” to transients who set up encampments, some of them quite elaborate.

Huts were made of bamboo, plywood, stolen or scrounged traps and metal. They were furnished with tattered and filthy bunks, mattresses, couches and chairs taken out of dumpsters or stolen from homes or businesses. The river dwellers used propane and freon for refrigerators, which were run on stolen generators or on stolen batteries.

Many of the transients were Vietnam veterans, and their camps looked much like the hooches they saw in the country—complete with booby traps.

San Diego PD officer Sylvia Vella, one of the first officers to work the project, said one river denizen had the metal sprocket that drives a bicycle chain attached to a large, bent branch rigged to the door of his hut. When the door was opened, the branch swung with a mighty force, sending the sprockets teeth ripping into the back of the intruder's head. Other huts used sharpened bamboo spears to drive off or impale uninvited guests.

Not all the transients used their imaginations for such violent purposes. One riverbed resident that dwelled in the valley about five years planted a garden and built a bamboo porch around his hut. Another built a tetherball court. Tree forts and rope swings were not uncommon.

Given the prevalence of methamphetamine and the number of transient-built recreational facilities in the valley, some camps were called “Club Meth.”

By day, the river dwellers sat about those encampments, using and selling drugs, buying stolen property, stashing their illicit goods. By night they ventured out on foot or bicycle to spread their criminal pestilence.

They spread conventional pestilence as well. Hygiene and personal protection in the camps was atrocious. Many there were HIV-positive. Many had skin diseases. Some had cancer. There were sexually transmitted diseases too numerous to count, varieties of mental illness that would fill a psychiatric manual.

Both Chula Vista and San Diego police departments noted increased calls for service directly attributable to the “river rats,” transients who dwelled in the riverbed.

Burglaries, vandalism, sexual assaults and the intimidating presence of smelly, unkempt progressive panhandlers in shopping areas all concerned South Bay residents.

As crime increased, neighbors became frightened when their children explored some of the paths that crisscrossed the area. That fear exploded with the 1993 murders of two neighborhood children, and the Otay River bed became a pressing community concern.

The POP project spanned four years in its most active phases, and was led by a partnership of the San Diego Police Department and the Chula Vista Police Department.

In addition to police, its active participants included eight major South Bay property owners, six agencies of the City of San Diego, four agencies of the State of California, three departments of the County of San Diego, three federal agencies and two agencies of the City of Chula Vista.

All that was missing, it seems, were a couple of partridges and a pear tree.

By the time the project concluded on June 23, 100 arrests were made in the valley; at least 50 tons of trash had been removed by volunteers in police-led cleanups, scores of transients had been removed from their encampments and the crime rate in the

area plummeted. Early figures indicate burglaries and related crimes have been reduced by 80%. But it was not an easy effort.

Along the way, management of the POP project changed hands several times as officers moved into new assignments.

On occasion, one level of government or other felt inadequately consulted and went into a bureaucratic pout.

Private citizens looked to police to solve crime problems created by transients living in the riverbed, while police looked upon the sprawling marshlands as a festering community problem.

Volunteers helped out during part of the project, and then left when they felt under-appreciated.

But we are getting ahead of our story, which began with two officers and their transient problems in 1991.

## **SCANNING**

San Diego PD officers Mark Haas and Joseph Snarponis of southern division noticed that transients living in an open field behind a Mervyn's department store at 600 Saturn were panhandling, committing petty thefts, buying and selling drugs, and generally constituting an ongoing public nuisance.

Haas and Snarponis found that the H.G. Fenton Company owned much of that land. The officers took pictures of the debris and health hazards on the properties and approached the firm.

Fenton property manager Alan Jones said the company would take care of the problem and it started to do just that—sending people out into the field to chase out the transients, and following the officers' recommendations that it chop down the high shrubbery and grasses on the property, thus denying bums places for their camps.

Indeed, a neighboring property owner for years had kept its land carefully pruned, but when a Fenton employee climbed aboard a bulldozer to do the same, state Fish & Game officers arrested him.

It seems that not only does the land lie within the area requiring coastal commission approval to do just about anything, but some of the vegetation and animal life is protected. State officials were not about to permit it to be bulldozed away.

Although stymied in the attempt to prune the vegetation to a manageable level, the police-community partnership had succeeded in displacing the transients, who hiked on upstream.

## **Two Tragic Deaths**

In their new location around the Hollister Street Bridge, the riverbed dwellers engaged in a new rash of fire-setting, petty thefts and burglaries.

In 1993, the protests of residents and business owners grew louder, as the vagabonds who dragged themselves from the mire of the riverbed became responsible for ever-increasing amounts of crime.

On March 23, 1993, those protests became thunderous as the bodies of two South Bay lads, Jonathan Sellers and Charles Keever, were found a quarter mile west of Interstate 5 on the western expanse of the riverbed. Immediately, suspicion fell on transients living in the valley.

While demands to clean up the valley grew louder in the-wake of the murders, police actually could do less for a while. Afraid to destroy evidence or scatter suspects and witnesses to the four winds, officers could but bide their time while the homicide investigation progressed.

Finally, six months after the murders, officers were permitted to go forward with cleanup plans.

On September 18, 1993, Vella and SDPD Officer Bobby Wight led a walk-through of the area, posting "No Trespassing" notices in two major concentrations of campsites.

A month later, a team of officers went through again, sending non-complying transients on their way.

## **ANALYSIS**

Before the inception of this project, the police response to crimes, which occurred in the Otay River Valley, was mostly of a “reactive” nature. Officers would respond to investigate crimes that had previously been committed, but most often the officer would have little knowledge of the area or its illegal inhabitants. Many of these crimes, ranging from burglary to wire theft, often went unsolved. Also, due to calls for service, the patrol officer rarely had time to meet with business/property owners in order to find out what their problems were and gain their cooperation.

By using the problem-oriented policing “SARA” model, along with an increase in the patrol force at Southern Division, officers were now able to budget their time, work with the community, employ techniques of “proactive” policing and get results that were previously impossible to achieve. These results were to the satisfaction of both the police and the community and could not have been accomplished without the joint teamwork that each provided.

After running crime analysis data for the area, it was discovered that many of the suspects committing these crimes were transients that were living in the Otay River Valley. These same transients were also littering and starting fires in this area. In September of 1993, two homicides occurred in the Otay River Valley. The victims of which were two young boys. This prompted an outcry from the community and kicked off the beginning of the “Otay River Valley Project.”

### **Pre-Enforcement Analysis**

Before the officers began attempting the “hands on” aspect of this project, it was essential for them to be armed with as much information as they could get regarding the Otay River Valley. Officers Bryon Barmer, Patti Clayton, and William Stutz, with the assistance of the SDPD Air Support Unit, did aerial photoreconnaissance of the area to help map out campsites and identify potential dangers, as well as access and egress points to the various areas.

The resources of SDPD crime analysis were used to document the types and amount of crime that was

occurring in and around the river bottom. This data was also compiled so that officers could compare “before” and “after” statistics to determine the effectiveness of the pop project. Officer Wight also organized the first of what would become many community committee meetings where law enforcement representatives could interface with property owners, elected officials and various public and private agencies to help achieve our similar goals of making the Otay River Valley a cleaner, safer place.

## **RESPONSE**

### **Joint Effort Begins**

Meanwhile, the Chula Vista Police Department had been working on its own end of the Otay River problem.

CVPD Sgt. Tom Maloney had been working the river bottom since the 1970s, and for years had regularly taken officers in his tutelage for muddy tours of the area encampments.

The time fast approached for Chula Vista and San Diego officers to enter a full-on partnership to rid the valley of the crime problems besetting both cities.

Chula Vista’s Lt. Art Gawf served as project coordinator, and liaison between the two police agencies,

Chula Vista and San Diego PD officers conducted monthly meetings, where they shared intelligence, updated their own Otay Valley River Bottom files and prepared the next stages of the long-lived project.

San Diego PD Capt. Dave Bejarano, who runs the southern division, thought the POP project planners ought to do more than simply reach out to members of other government agencies and private businesses—he wanted to include people who could make the effort work.

“Bejarano suggested that we get in touch with the department heads, people who could make decisions,” said Wight, one of the major architects of the project.

“He didn’t want the group to get all stalled in a sea of regulations. He wanted people who could decide that notwithstanding what the book says, this or that regulation could be waived or alternative arrangements made people who could work imaginatively.”

An ad hoc steering committee came together, with representatives of both police departments; CalTrans; various city, state and county agencies; elected officials; numerous property owners, and representatives of such companies as Laidlaw and BFI Waste Systems, which agreed to help with the cleanup.

Planners developed a three-stage approach:

- Enforcement, in which the transients would be moved out:
- Cleanup, in which trash, stolen property, old cars and sundry debris would be taken out: and
- Environmental enhancement, in which underbrush would be cleared out, ensuring the camps would not return.

### **Phase I: Enforcement**

The first Phase of this project was to start enforcement activities. This involved the San Diego District Attorney’s office, the property owners, the San Diego Police Department and the Chula Vista Police Department. On September 16, 1994, transients were given trespass notices and ordered to vacate the grounds. They were also provided with information on homeless shelters in the area. They were given information on how to acquire proper identification cards.

Officer Stutz compiled the field interviews and photographs of the subjects who were served notice to leave the river valley. He created separate files on each of the subjects so that officers involved with the project would be able to easily access information on certain individuals without having to wade through the wealth of paperwork, which the project generated.

These files contained the subject’s photo and biographical information, as well as the date the subject was served, last known camp location, weapons history, criminal history, rap sheet and other pertinent information that an officer would find useful when preparing to deal with these subjects. On September 23, 1994, after the official notification process was completed, all camps were torn down.

### **Phase II: Clean Up**

Part one of Phase II took place on September 24, 1994. The clean up involved many law enforcement personnel to provide security and approximately 200 volunteers from several organizations picked up thirty-eight tons of trash. These volunteers also cleaned up the campsites and returned them to an almost natural state.

Part two of Phase II took place on June 23, 1995. Another clean up similar to the first was organized and this time 30 tons of trash was removed from the Otay River Valley. One slight difference was the use of prison inmates from the Donovan State Prison facility. Volunteers from the NCCC group were again used.

### **Phase III: Problem Solution**

Phase III has been implemented. The access to the Otay River Valley has been limited. Only those who have official business can access this area in a vehicle. A schedule has been created for routine security checks through the Valley to keep transients out. Increased security measures have been implemented at businesses in the Otay River Valley.

### **Into the Muck**

Because the marshy area so resembles parts of Vietnam, and because of their assignment in inhospitable terrain, the San Diego PD’s Border Crime Intervention Unit (BCIU) seemed a natural for this enforcement effort.

BCIU teamed up with the Chula Vista PD’s street crimes unit, serving notice on transients in the valley that they were trespassing. Officers went through the valley and FI-ed everyone they found, running warrant checks. Most had minor warrants, although

a few had some serious pending cases and were arrested. The team did three notification sweeps before taking trespassing enforcement action.

Meanwhile, other team members met with members of the DA's South Bay office, telling prosecutors of the effort and making them familiar with what the project was trying to accomplish.

"We didn't want the DA to see the cases coming out of there as just run-of-the-mill trespassing cases, but to appreciate the very serious crime problem we were trying to address in this fashion," Wight said.

Prosecutors said they needed photos to show the transients were not just camping overnight in the valley, but had set up permanent homes. The photos had to show debris, quasi-permanently constructed homes, piles of clothing, and other indicia of long-term occupancy.

The SDPD air arm, ABLE, flew over the valley three times with project officers aboard, as the preparations went on. Because the camouflaged camps are difficult to spot, ABLE tried to find them using the on-board infrared vision device.

For a while, it looked like the transients were preparing, too.

"Just before we were ready to go in, (Officer) Mark Aysta was driving down-Hollister Street one night and someone took pot Shots at him from the brush," said Wight.

"There were rumors that a transient had a rifle and was going to shoot a cop."

Although those rumors, fortunately, never came true, officers did recover a sawed-off .22 caliber rifle, an assortment of knives, ingredients for making pipe bombs, and other decidedly unfriendly articles as the sweep progressed.

### **Operation Knock Down**

Staged in September 1994, a planned major cleanup of the entire valley encountered logistic difficulties that meant only two thirds of the project was completed.

Dubbed "Operation Knock Down," it involved the two police agencies, the H.G. Fenton Company, the U.S. Border Patrol and CalTrans.

The federal National Civilian Community Corps, the California Conservation Corps, and the federal urban Youth Corps provided the clean-up labor.

This project was the first time federal volunteers had been used on such a major effort on the West Coast, and it was closely monitored.

Planners brought in the California Coastal Commission and the state Department of Fish & Game, as well as federal ecologists because of the environmental issues, inherent in any clean-up effort in the ecologically fragile area.

The San Diego Fire Department's fire marshal and hazardous materials specialists were included because of the hazardous waste at several campsites.

Property owners Fenton, Stafford Gardner Development Company, Nelson and Sloan concrete company, Desert Industries, Tru-Span Industries, San Diego Dry Mix and others were all involved.

"It seems as if I spent weeks of my life on the phone trying to get all these people," said Wight.

Last September 24 was a hot and dusty day, as volunteers trudged through the valley reminiscing what a newspaper account said was at least 35 tons of trash. It was hauled to the Miramar landfill, where officials had waived the customary dumping fees.

On June 23, the last stage in the clean-up phase was completed, with volunteer labor provided by Donovan prison convicts, among others.

Pat Clayton and Roxana Kennedy led that part of the project, supported by task force members from both police agencies and by a host of business owners and government officials.

### **ASSESSMENT**

By the time the project concluded on June 23, 100 arrests were made in the valley; at least 50 tons of trash had been removed by volunteers in police-led cleanups, scores of transients had been removed

from their encampments and the crime rate in the area plummeted. Early figures indicate burglaries and related crimes have been reduced by 80%. But it was not an easy effort.

While the law enforcement portion of this project draws to a close, vegetation in the Otay River bed still needs to be shorn back and the vast area will, for a time, require ongoing police monitoring to make sure transients do not simply move back in.

Longer range, the City of San Diego has plans to turn the entire vast area into a community park and wildlife refuge that itself should go a long way toward working a permanent solution to this once-festering problem.

For now, however, the grit and determination of scores of officers working in partnership with the community demonstrated that even the most persistent, seemingly intractable problems could be overcome-through imaginative policing.

## CONCLUSION

The lessons we learned over the past several years have been many, and other officers planning POP projects on a grand scale may find guidance.

Among them:

- Bring in every interested person and agency you can think of at the earliest possible stage, and get those people enthused about finding a solution to your common problem;
- Make sure those who join your effort have the power to make decisions, or you will be stalled while an endless series of “checks” are made with bosses even on the simplest matters;
- Make sure your department superiors stand firmly behind your project, fully understanding the time commitment it requires, for long-term projects allowed to wither due to lack of time are not worth starting;
- Do not hesitate to build a partnership with another law enforcement agency, but make

sure it is a true partnership with shared goals, commitment of resources and effort, and responsibility;

- While you are trying simply to solve a problem, anticipate the inherent desire of elected (and some appointed) officials to get on television and in the newspaper taking at least partial credit for your project;
- Do not take support or assistance for granted, but ask for it at the earliest possible time;
- Determine in advance how you are going to thank those who assist the project, so they will know they are appreciated and will not simply feel used;
- Make sure your officers and the community—community organizations, property owners, residents—know this is not a “police” project, but a “community” project, and you are there to lead and facilitate, but the responsibility ultimately is theirs;
- Remember the old maxim, “there is no limit to the good you can do, if you don’t care who gets the credit.”

## NOTES

Roxana Kennedy is a police officer on the Chula Vista Police Department’s street team. She has been a police officer three years and has worked on the Otay River Valley POP project for 14 months.

Patty Clayton is a San Diego police officer assigned to patrol in Southern Division. She has been a police officer four years and has worked on the Otay River Valley POP project for 10 months. Clayton and Kennedy have led their agencies’ efforts in the most recent stage of the project.

## Personnel Involved

Sergeant Jerome Mcmanus  
Officer Bobby Wight  
Officer Darrell Loughrey  
Reserve Officer Steve Casey

Officer Bryon Barner  
Officer William Stutz

Officer Patti Clayton