

# WEST FIRST PROJECT

## COMBATING AN EMERGING DRUG MARKET IN “THE BLOCK”

SPOKANE POLICE DEPARTMENT, WASHINGTON, 1997

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- THE PROBLEM:** Spokane experienced an influx of criminal drug gangs and large-scale drug dealing concentrated in a downtown area known as “The Block.” Crime increased exponentially and became increasingly violent generating a tremendous increase in calls for service. This single city block accounted for approximately three-percent of the service load for the entire city taxing police resources, threatening local businesses, and the diminishing the quality of life for all of the area residents.
- ANALYSIS:** Research indicated that traffickers targeted an "undeveloped market" in a mid-size city motivated by financial profit by building the level of addiction to a previously un-introduced drug, crack cocaine. Offenders were not just stereotypical drug users from bad neighborhoods, but “average” citizens.
- RESPONSE:** The criminal justice responses included prosecuting gang members under organized crime statutes; code enforcement, liquor boards, and enhancing correctional supervision of offenders living in the project area. Volunteers were mobilized; business owners were organized by common concerns; and CPTED principles were used to build defensible space.
- ASSESSMENT:** Since December 1996, violent crime in the area has decreased 75% from previous levels, and calls for service and officer-initiated activity are down 35%. As of June 1997, the "Block" has been revitalized. The elimination of criminal activity on the block created a void, which was filled with legitimate business activity.
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### SCANNING

The City of Spokane, Washington, is the largest metropolitan area between Seattle, Washington, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. An influx of out-of-the-area sophisticated criminal drug gangs in downtown Spokane led to large-scale drug dealing. Spokane is the focal point for transportation (rail, freight, trucking, bus, air and intermodal) for the vast Inland Pacific Northwest. With a City population of approximately 200,000, and a combined regional population of almost one-half million, Spokane is also the focal point for retail, industry, services, and recreation. Spokane boasts nine colleges and universities, including Gonzaga University, Whitworth College, the Spokane campuses of Eastern Washington University and Washington State University, as well as several community colleges. Spokane also has seven major hospitals, comprising the most comprehensive health services within a six-hour radius. Due to the concentration of services, people from all of Eastern Washington, Eastern Oregon, Idaho, Western Montana, and parts of British Columbia come to Spokane to be educated, shop, recreate, and access services and transportation.

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Spokane was also a destination city for people moving away from the rising tide of crime and violence in larger urban areas (such as Seattle and many California cities). Spokane enjoyed a reputation of being relatively crime-free and was considered a safe and beautiful place to raise a family. However, the influx of (particularly California and Chicago Crip) gang members selling crack cocaine in the early 1990's has left Spokane's reputation of a viable community in doubt. In 1992, the community began realizing the horrors of the organized drug trade, and all the associated violent crimes that come with it (e.g., knifings, shootings, assaults, sexual offenses, robberies). The crimes had a negative impact on the lives and on the psyche of the community.

Criminal gangs concentrated their activities in a localized urban area, the 1100 block of West First Avenue, known locally as "The Block." This downtown area was characterized by a mix of land uses and densities, and had physically and socially deteriorated over the years. The area of West First was comprised mostly of older, high-rise residential hotels, street-level businesses with alcove entries and back alleys, railroad viaducts, taverns and bars, and 24-hour adult-oriented video stores and shops.

The gangs chose the West First area because of its proximity to cheap room rentals, the only Greyhound bus terminal, and because it was already a neighborhood where most of the low-income, special needs and elderly residents had already "given up" the street. Concentrated in 1100 block of West First were the city's only public housing apartment building, the bus terminal, the clubs and taverns, and several notorious nightly rent room hotels. The residents at the Parsons, Spokane Housing Authority's apartment building, are either persons with physical or developmental disabilities or elderly. They, and other residents of the block, were easily intimidated.

Increases in citizen fear, complaints, and requests for additional police patrols from businesses on the block assisted the police in identifying the nature and scope of the problem. The police also experienced a tremendous increase in calls for services. In the late 1980's, the 1100 block of West First generated less than 1,000 annual calls for service. From 1990 to 1994, calls for service increased each year. By 1995, the block was generating over 3,000 calls for service each year. This single city block accounted for approximately three-percent of the service load for the entire City of Spokane, which encompasses some 5,500 blocks. In this block, veteran officers observed that crimes were becoming increasingly violent, involving persons rather than property. The disregard for human life was increasing lessening at an alarming rate.

Law enforcement, citizens, the Spokane Housing Authority, and media coverage of violent crimes and incidents in the area identified the problems. Surveys of citizens and residents were used to further identify the nature and extent of the problem. The Housing Authority sought Public Housing Drug Elimination Program (PHDEP) funds from the US Department of Housing & Urban Development, in partnership with local police, to help combat the problem on the block. In 1992-93, as part of the HUD PHDEP grant planning process, several resident surveys were conducted.

Local media also focused on the block increasing police attention to the problem. Police records and statistics were largely un-automated. The police department had formed a partnership with the Spokane County Sheriff's Office to jointly develop a CAD/RMS system, which was no on-line. The police department received a grant in 1992 to assist with developing technology and information management. That year, the Spokane Police Department was selected as one of sixteen cities nationwide to develop a prototype (or framework) for community oriented policing by the US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance. The goal of the technology/data development was to help give officers better tools for problem solving.

The problem was receiving disproportionate share of police resources. The high resource response level was unequivocal, for the scope of the problem and the violent nature of drug trafficking threatened the very life of our community. Response in the project area was also due to the citizen, media, business and

governmental calls for problem resolution. The drug activity and crimes were basically taking place in a one-block area, yet their impacts were rapidly declining the physical and social fabric of the entire neighborhood.

The project area is a high-density urban business district, immediately adjacent to the historical downtown shopping core, government offices, and near several media outlets (including electronic media and the city's only daily newspaper). A 1994 Gonzaga University poverty study identified tremendous levels of "urban flight," confirming the (1990 Census) data that the downtown core contained those census tracts with the majority of people living at or well below the poverty line.

These economic conditions not only impacted the retail base, but also made the area even more prime for complete abandonment and decay. The City did not want to lose its downtown to anonymous crime, victimization and drugs.

There were multiple levels of initial problem diagnosis. They stemmed from the different resources gathered to scan the problem once a coordinated response began. Crime-type scanning began with the Crime Analysis unit (later supported and blended into the grant-funded Information Management Unit). Neighborhood data was gathered for diagnosis through resident and citizen surveys, led by Spokane Police and Housing Authority staff. Specific premise and offender group information was compiled by the police department's Special Investigations Unit, which tracks and investigates organized criminal gang activity. Their scanning tracked the level of organization, sophistication, and movements of the Crip gang members.

Comprehensive problem diagnosis was then supported (and given scientific credibility) by Washington State University. Researchers were interested in the unique partnership between police, housing, citizens, and business to combat a specific crime problem in one area. Several of the professors (and the University's Institute for Community Oriented Policing) had evaluated and reported nationally on many innovative Spokane police programs and community initiatives.

After reviewing initial scanning results, Drs. Quint Thurman and Ed McGarrel sought companion grant funds from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) to study process and outcomes of the proposed problem solving. Their emphasis focused especially on the housing authority's "R.O.A.R.," or "Reclaim Our Area Residences" program. And, while the initial year of HUD funding for R.O.A.R. was declined, the university received a multi-year grant from NIJ to study the project.

## **ANALYSIS**

The methods and sources of analysis followed those partners collaborating on the comprehensive scanning described above. Methodology included formal resident surveys through the housing authority's PHDEP grant planning sessions. Broader citizen surveys/interviews were constructed and conducted in the neighborhood by researchers from Washington State University evaluating the R.O.A.R. planning.

Uniformed police officers sought assistance from business owners on how the police could help business to remain confident in the safety of the project area. Two Ph.D. candidates from WSU also conducted extensive observations, as well as a social and physical inventory of the neighborhood, accompanied by Officer Rick Albin.

Two police civilians trained in "Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design," or CPTED, were brought in to analyze the access, traffic patterns, surveillance opportunities, informal and formal monitoring, physical needs, and positive use in the neighborhood. Their analysis determined basic needs, but found the project area particularly challenging due to the mixed land uses and low definitions of public-private space (defensible space) existing in the neighborhood. When the Spokane Housing Authority received R.O.A.R. funding the following year, a top CPTED consultant in the nation, Mr.

Bruce Ramm, was brought in to complete a more exhaustive survey of the project area. He made recommendations to reduce specific crime generators and increase resident feelings of ownership and territoriality.

Those primarily involved in the problem were organized drug traffickers in sophisticated criminal gangs who had targeted an "undeveloped market" in a mid-size city. Their motivations centered upon tremendous financial profits based upon building the level of addiction to a previously un-introduced drug, crack cocaine.

We were also confident that they assumed local law enforcement would not rise up to the challenge of confronting the crime problem, once it was established. National gang intelligence has tracked the movement of these large urban gangs into smaller cities in isolated areas (especially the Northwest and Midwest). They had also set up business in a neighborhood, which showed all the classic signs of one already in decline, teetering on the brink of total abandonment to crime and victimization. Their initial gain was the establishment of a foothold in the neighborhood. They profited from the physical and social disorganization of the project area. Their loss was that mobilization of the entire community in response to the problem was complete and successful. They have now abandoned the territory, rather than having won it over from those living there.

In Spokane, offenders were not just stereotypical drug users and criminals. Much of the demand came from "average" citizens (downtown professionals, housewives, youth, etc.) who found the convenience of a "drive-through," open-air drug mart seductively attractive. These were not offenders who would have normally parked in a "bad" neighborhood, walked up to a crack house, and made a purchase. They were, however, comfortable with stopping their Lexus briefly on a street, blocks from their downtown office, to make the same purchase.

Other victims in the initial foothold of the problem were Spokane's street and homeless youth. Their motivation for involvement focused on the money they could make, serving as lookouts, runners, or street-dealers for the gangs. This was in sharp contrast to any money they could make legally, especially with Spokane's level of industry, educational attainment, and living wage standard. At first, youth involvement was a peripheral activity, with some youth enamored by the money and status of "belonging to" or associating with a gang. But, as the tactical police response (one arm of the problem-solving effort) led to federal prosecutions for drug trafficking, the gangs heightened the stakes by purposefully recruiting more youth. Their sophistication gave them knowledge that we would not prosecute juveniles federally, and so they blunted an initial strategy employed and realized a (temporary) gain.

The harms resulting from the initial problem foothold included: business flight from the project area; increased resident fear and harassment; total abandonment of the streets at night by any but criminal-types; continued decay of the neighborhood; a whole new class of addiction for non-traditional drug users; increased violence due to the influence and drive for drugs; growing stress on police and social service providers in the project area; recruitment of youth into more crime, street prostitution and drugs; and a growing perception that no one in the community cared about what happened to the (mostly poor, homeless, disabled, or elderly) residents of a declining downtown neighborhood.

Several strategies were employed before the formal problem-solving project began. These efforts, while worthwhile, were disparate in their intent and level of support/organization. A loose group of business owners, uneasy about the problem and effects on their properties, formed.

The formation of the West First Business group suffered from a lack of common focus. Many of the business partners had varied interests and motivations for area improvement. They also had not established comfortable relationships with many of the social service providers and residents of the area.

As the meetings were opened up to include more people, the lack of focus and a common goal became

more apparent. Groups within the group tended to focus on their issue, whether that was providing better services to (shut-in-by-fear) residents, self-taxing to fund better (private) security and physical improvements (lighting, business security cameras, etc.), or police strategies to eliminate (and not just displace) the problem. Everyone did agree, however, on intensified police presence, high visibility, and a tactical "zero tolerance" strategy. Thus, law enforcement took the lead in coordinating a more comprehensive, problem-solving response.

All of the combined analysis revealed the causes and underlying conditions related to a loss of ownership, sense of territoriality, positive use, pride and involvement in the physical neighborhood. Some of the economic, social, and physical conditions of many of the downtown residents made their efforts to articulate concerns and fears more difficult. Surveys showed the majority of them felt captive to the inevitable loss of their neighborhood, and that they had adjusted their lifestyles around that loss.

Businesses who were financially able to relocate did; those that could not began catering to the criminal influences and drug trade in order to survive. Several of the business owners turned a blind eye to drug dealing within their establishments, became less cooperative with police, and even protected the gang members. The sense of isolation, lack of empowerment, and seduction of accommodating the activity precipitated the abandonment of the project area to the problem.

The analysis revealed the nature and extent of the problem was more than one-dimensional; it existed on several levels and took many shapes and forms. The nature of the problem was common to many (large and mid-size city) downtown business districts, and many had fallen to the problem. The extent of the problem in Spokane was a strong foothold, established quickly and intentionally to take advantage of any community's initial denial that this could possibly be happening. The problem became somewhat rooted due to the initial stages of disorganization, also common in any city's initial response to such a swift building of a previously non-existent, serious criminal problem.

As the police-led comprehensive plan began taking shape, situational information needed to better understand the problem included: the extent of commitment and determination by all community partners (business, residents, government, social services, and even the media) to solve the problem; the willingness of a diverse group of people to mobilize and strive toward a common goal; further analysis of known offenders, their cycle of rotation, peak times of occurrence and habits; the level of cooperation police could generate (with what types of leverage) from business owners and property managers to root out the trade; and the fiscal reality of making physical changes in the environment to lead to social changes.

From 1992, there have been several open community discussions about the problem. Some of these were tailored to affected residents and businesses within the project area. Some were organized within the larger context of Spokane's Community Oriented Policing Services ("C.O.P.S. Shops"), who help train and mobilize citizen volunteers. Other, larger open community meetings included town-hall meetings over rising violent crime concerns, school-based meetings organizing substance-abuse resistance training, and media/press coverage.

## **RESPONSE**

Possible tactical response alternatives included: saturated police patrols; foot and bicycle patrols; downtown officers with cell-phones giving business cards with their phone numbers to businesses owners and residents for direct, immediate contact; mailing "public safety letters" to registered owners of vehicles seen stopping on the block; designating a downtown "Neighborhood Resource Officer;" establishing a downtown neighborhood "C.O.P.S. Shop;" and employing video surveillance of the block.

Other criminal justice response options included more coordinated, vertical prosecution and alternative sanctions for gang members; prosecuting under organized crime statutes; code enforcement; liquor

boards; and enhanced Corrections interactions with offenders living in the project area. Non-criminal justice response alternatives included: mobilizing trained citizen volunteers; coordinating business owners by type/commonality of concern; arranging for physical improvement and clean-up of the neighborhood; organizing apartment owners and managers for improved resident screening; and making environmental changes following CPTED principles to build better definitions of defensible space.

The first response centered on the downtown patrol officers and Neighborhood Resource Officer Rick Albin as catalysts for change. A second response empowered residents to regain a sense of control, pride and ownership in their neighborhood. Analysis showed that the key was listening to the residents, responding to their concerns, and having them gain confidence in actions based upon their articulation of issues, regardless of social or educational level. The third response was the economic revitalization of the project area, which would promote neighborhood stability. The lateral partnerships formed among state and local government, government and service agencies, business, academia and citizens were also instrumental in responding to this problem.

Initial evaluation criteria centered on crime reduction, cost-effectiveness, reduction in resource demand, and legal issues. As the project and citizen efforts evolved, police definitions of project "success" and evaluation criteria were broadened to be more values-based. Evaluation emphasis is now on practicality, effectiveness and results, as well as community benefit.

The short-term goal was crime reduction and a "taking back" of the project area from the criminal element. Measurable results included reduced calls for services, crime reporting, and citizen complaints. On the positive side, this would also nurture the beginnings of "growing" a sense of neighborhood identity again. But short-term police tactics often fail to produce lasting results without the proper focus on long-term problem solving. Our long-term intention was to accomplish the complete revitalization of a neighborhood, restore order where disorder reigned, and re-form business and resident attachment to the project area to ensure lasting success.

Many resources were available, and continue to be available, for long-term problem resolution. As momentum for the project grew, more business resources, media partners, agency and government resources, and citizen volunteers came forward to realize the vision. Efforts begun before implementation included business efforts, housing authority grant/resident organization, and enhanced police tactical strategies contained within a sector.

Difficulties encountered during the response implementation included a lack of cohesion or common goals; multiple intentions, which sometimes clashed; a citizenry largely underpowered and undervalued; and a highly sophisticated criminal enterprise designed to capitalize on initial denial and disorganization.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Since December 1996, violent crime in the area is down 75% from previous levels, and calls for service (combined with officer-initiated activity) is down an average of 35%. As of June 1997, the "Block" has taken on a new look and identity. This change was neither coincidental nor unplanned. In order to change the perception of the project area, participants searched for a new identity. The former business group established better relationships and shaped common short- and long-term goals with the rest of the neighborhood. The new, broader group is known as the "Market District Steering Committee" now. The elimination of criminal activity on the block created a vacuum. The steering committee challenged them to fill that void with legitimate business activity.

A resource team was created to help failing, positive businesses stay viable. Business and economic revitalization have changed the face of the neighborhood. Formerly vacant storefronts are now occupied; an art gallery replaced a bingo parlor, and the Spokane Farmer's Market (a non-profit community organization) found a home in a vacant warehouse. They serve as a "seed bed" for new businesses, and

provide an attractive, fun setting for well-priced sale of local farm goods and produce. The image of the former "Block" has been replaced by "The Market District," with the Spokane Farmer's Market as the anchor hub. An interactive Children's Museum is relocating to the West First area soon.

## NOTES

1. A neighborhood C.O.P.S. police station, called "TOPCOPS," was established with trained citizen volunteers, who now serve as a resource for other residents. The facility also houses NRO Rick Albin and two (State parole) Community Corrections Officers.
2. The police, city government and business owners contributed over \$250,000 to make physical improvements in the neighborhood. Using the CPTED recommendations, changes were made to street and alley lighting, traffic flow, parking and parking meters, removal of attractive nuisances, and building repair and renovation. Building exteriors along the block were cleaned and painted, and citizens formed regular crews to clean up litter and keep sidewalks swept. Particularly high-risk areas (such as dark areas underneath the railroad viaduct) were painted white and fenced off, while still allowing visibility should someone climb the fence. Positive use activities (social, business promotion, etc.) now replace former activities in high-risk areas. The steering committee also donated funds to hire a part-time marketing/research assistant, and alliances were formed with other downtown groups and Spokane's Economic Development Council to facilitate coordinated change.
3. A motel/hotel/housing association was formed. Resident managers and property owners were trained in legal screening techniques for prospective residents, how to identify a potential drug lab, and using a telephone tree and regular communication to avoid repeat renting to people evicted from other properties. A "Downtown Safety Net" was established to identify drug traffickers who thought they could move from one property to another and continue selling drugs with virtual impunity. A voice pager system was also funded to provide faster linkage between police and hotel/motel managers. Similarly, auto dealers and other like-business owners formed sub-associations to agree on common goals and strategies. The auto dealer owners, for instance, funded surveillance cameras, which record criminal activity on their properties as well as the rest of West First. This video surveillance is tied into the existing (internal) monitors at the public housing apartment building, which houses "TOPCOPS," and is monitored 24-hours per day.
4. WSU researchers evaluating the R.O.A.R. project for NTJ mostly designed the methods of evaluation early in the response plan. This comprehensive evaluation has been underway since 1994. Process and outcome methodologies include focus groups, field observation, documentation of changes in the physical and social environment, a variety of (self administered) and facilitated written surveys, observation at planning and regular meetings, and direct participation in some of the directed tactical and social strategies.
5. The inter-active evaluation has been led by researchers from WSU, but includes all agency, government, business, and citizen participants mentioned.
6. There has been significant improvement in the problem to date. Most of the response goals described earlier have been accomplished. Because the problem built to a peak in 1995-96, and the coordinated response came to fruition in 1996-97, a few of the goals remain, but are clearly within reach. The project and evaluation is on going.
7. Results to date have been measured using the different methods already described. We are continually in assessment of how the response could be more effective.
8. The displacement concern has been addressed by simultaneously working with other

neighborhoods to organize around their issues and build a resistance to this type of crime.

9. Our response does require continued monitoring and effort to maintain results. Fortunately, WSU has committed to a new, extended evaluation partnership. This represents a shift in paradigm for WSU (a traditional land-grant university). They want to solidify their presence (in Spokane) as an urban campus, and are supporting the evaluation of West First as a cornerstone commitment to their new urban mission and the Spokane community.