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OF HOT-SPOTS AND BAND-AIDS

Intensively policing troubled areas isn't a lasting remedy

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. In 2005 L.A. County Sheriff Lee Baca bemoaned that a scarcity of resources was limiting his ability to battle gang murders in Compton, which the LASD serves under contract. With nearly half his patrol deputies committed to contracts with other cities and his countywide gang squad seriously understaffed, the Sheriff was reluctant to shift officers to a "hot spot" lest problems pop up elsewhere. But when year-end stats revealed that murders in Compton were sharply higher while those in nearby LAPD areas were way down, Baca flooded the city with homicide detectives, gang investigators and deputies from unincorporated areas.

After a couple months of success the impromptu task force was disbanded. As one might expect, Compton promptly reverted to its old habits. When a July 2006 weekend of violence left four dead and others wounded, Baca sent back the extra troops, and that's where they remain. Compton is getting a lot more police coverage than it pays for, and no one's apologizing.

There is no question that hefty, localized increases in police coverage can dampen violent crime. That's why N.Y.P.D. recently decided to assign an entire academy graduating class of 914 recruits to its mobile field force, doubling it to nearly 2,000 so that it can start flooding troubled areas in Brooklyn. This flexibility is made possible by its superiority in numbers, in turn made possible by what New York City officers get paid (hint: it's a lot less than L.A.) Except for wealthy communities, high salaries are invariably accompanied by low patrol densities, so sustaining a police "surge" (thing Baghdad) can be difficult. Just how expensive is it to police SoCal? West Covina, a typical middle-class community, estimates salary and benefits for a single officer at $125,000 per year. Since four officers are required for 24/7 coverage (three plus one for days off), that's $500,000 for one cop around the clock, not including a vehicle, gas, equipment or support services! If officers work in pairs figure a cool million per year, per patrol car.

How does hot spot policing work? It's simple: stop as many suspicious vehicles and pedestrians as possible. Under the "Terry" doctrine officers can frisk anyone they reasonably suspect is armed. Since the Supreme Court's ruling that the underlying "reason" why a cop stops a car is immaterial, traffic laws are applied to the hilt.

Everything from a “white light to the rear”, to a missing expiration year sticker, to a five-mile per hour speeding violation is used to justify stops.

But searching a vehicle or going beyond a pat-down requires more than suspicion -- it calls for either consent or probable cause. And that’s where the troubles begin. Pressured to show results, officers have fudged observations, falsified reports and abused suspects. Other than for Rafael Perez, the cocaine-stealing officer who originally blew the whistle, the Rampart scandal was never about cops lining their pockets -- it was about officers lying, cheating and planting evidence to justify arrests and cover up acts of brutality, including some terrible use-of-force mistakes.

Can intensive policing make a lasting dent on violence? Yes, if officers remain indefinitely. Otherwise, no. Surges usually happen in areas -- like Compton -- that are poor and socially disorganized. That’s why it’s nearly impossible to “fill in” behind departing officers with community-based initiatives, as those require the active involvement of citizens who aren’t afraid to testify and help police.

Hot-spot approaches may also have a natural life-cycle. If limited to a narrow time frame aggressive enforcement is likely to be accepted, even welcomed. But policing is not a precise instrument. Unless officers proceed with exquisite care, innocent persons will inevitably get caught up in the dragnet, and as the inevitable confrontations and misunderstandings pile up citizen support is likely to diminish.

Is there a better solution than the hot-spot band-aid? Probably not. Ideally, law enforcement resources would be distributed according to crime problems, not citizens’ ability to pay. Unfortunately, American policing has from inception been highly fragmented, thus dependent on local funding. Extreme situations like L.A. County’s, where the Sheriff’s budget is overwhelmed by jail needs and contracts prevent sending deputies where they are most needed, only emphasize the structural defects of a criminal justice system that, no matter how unintentionally, best serves the interests of wealthy communities.

Don’t believe it? Go visit Beverly Hills P.D. Don’t get lost in their headquarters, which wags have dubbed the Taj Mahal. Wind your way through rows of detective desks to the crimes against persons squad. (Try not to do it on the day when they have their one murder a year.) Tell them Compton needs help. Then oink back!