Posted 1/11/09

WHAT CAN COPS *REALLY* DO?

Specialized teams can help, but their officers must come from somewhere

    By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. "We have shown time and again that if you invest in law enforcement and hold police accountable . . . you will absolutely have a very definitive effect on crime." According to LAPD Assistant Chief Earl Paysinger, that's why the citizens of Los Angeles are enjoying a continued drop in homicide, with six percent fewer killings in 2008 than 2007, a reduction of twenty-seven percent over five years. Paysinger was taking his cue from Chief "Hollywood" Bill Bratton, whose well-known refrain -- "I take credit when crime goes down, I take blame when crime goes up" -- sticks in the craw of criminologists who insist that economics and social forces have a far greater effect on crime trends than the police.

    As regular readers of the *Los Angeles Times* know, the paper enjoys a long-running love affair with the Chief. Citing no authority other than Paysinger, the same article flatly reports that "the drop in violence is due, in part, to the LAPD's success in reducing gang-related crimes." Never mind that near the end of the piece the luckless commander of the crime-besotted Central Division calls a startling one-year jump of 21 percent in robberies nothing to worry about: "These things happen. Some years numbers go up a little; some years they're down. The important thing is we are not seeing any patterns [that suggest larger problems]." Incidentally, Bratton's goal of an overall five-percent crime drop wasn't met (it was half that). And with the city's finances in the toilet, his crime-reduction goals for 2009 are yet to be set.

    Can the police really impact crime? If there is an effect, can it be measured? These are distinct questions, but to answer the first requires that we say "yes" to the second. That's where the problem comes in. In a recent op-ed in the L.A. Times, James Q. Wilson credited "sharp" declines in crime in New York and Los Angeles to strategies such as Compstat and stop-and-frisk. He also had particularly kind words to say about Bratton: "What he has accomplished without a big increase in the size of his force has been remarkable." Then, in his very next breath, America's top expert on the police made a stunning turnaround:

> To try to sort out the combined and complex relations between crime and the economy, the age of the population, imprisonment, police work, neighborhood culture and gang activity, the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Law
> and Justice (which I chair) has begun an effort to explain something that no one

has yet explained: Why do crime rates change? If you have any good ideas, let me know.

Well, that's helpful!

Some cities are experiencing far higher crime drops than L.A. In 2008 homicide in Milwaukee declined a startling 32 percent, while in Cleveland it fell 24 percent. Police credited the improvements to targeted enforcement strategies, including flooding affected areas with cops and using stop-and-frisk to arrest potential shooters and get guns off the street.

Criminologists speak of two kinds of deterrence: general and specific. "General deterrence" works by creating fear of punishment. Citizens are made aware that there is a criminal justice system, that police are on patrol and that evildoers go to jail. Cranking it up by, say, flooding a problem neighborhood with cops can tamp things down even more. Unfortunately, improvements usually prove fleeting; when cops move on as eventually they must, crime returns.

One way to enhance the gains is by bringing in the second kind of deterrence. In "specific deterrence" we prevent future crimes by arresting offenders. While the preventive effects are lagged, meaning they might not be immediately felt, they will persist as long as perpetrators remain incarcerated, thus unable to commit more crimes.

"Hot spot policing" that combines aspects of general and specific deterrence, such as in Milwaukee and Cleveland, may offer the best solution. However, as the economy sours and officer/population ratios deteriorate, increasing coverage in one area might require drawing officers away from another, in effect robbing Peter to pay Paul. When some of L.A.'s better-off citizens learned that their already skimpily patrolled neighborhoods would have even fewer cops, their reaction was predictable.

Is it possible to "do" specific deterrence without redistributing officers? Detroit thinks so. It partnered with the U.S. Marshal's Service in a campaign to round up fugitives; at year's end homicide was down fourteen percent. No, the results weren't equal to Milwaukee's, but the impact on patrol coverage was minimal. And if those caught up in the dragnets were active criminals, taking them off the street -- and keeping them off -- absolutely prevented crime.

Keeping them off. There's more to it than just making arrests. Now that they constitute as many as half or more of all murders, stranger homicides present a particularly vexing problem. Many are gang killings, where willing witnesses are rare, and despite the promises of CSI there may be little physical evidence left behind other

than a bullet. Cutbacks that thin the detective ranks, perhaps to bolster patrol, may leave little opportunity to do the intensive, *quality* legwork that's necessary to identify and convict killers, and none to investigate other serious offenses that, had they been solved, might have also led to the incapacitation of dangerous men.

Crime rates fluctuate. Even when the swings are as pronounced as Milwaukee's we disparage them as "random" not because they really are but because we lack the tools to accurately measure and apportion the change. What part is attributable to social forces? The economy? Policing? That uncertainty, though, shouldn't discourage police from putting their best friend in the crime-fighting business to work. Specific deterrence *works:* as long as we keep arresting and imprisoning active offenders we'll prevent crime. And that's something you *can* count on.