Cops become more neighborly: Community-oriented approach, called STOP, is tested in City Heights

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Author: JOE CANTLUPE

When the cops arrived, Angel was shimmying into her miniskirt and Johnny was sliding out the window. They were caught in the act.

Officers Dave Jennings and Dave Headley know Johnny and Angel well. Johnny is Angel's pimp, lover, candyman. And the guy who sometimes beats her horribly.

Angel and Johnny are among the dozens of players in a sometimes deadly game of violence and fear that has eroded City Heights. Some residents, seeing their neighborhoods torn by prostitution, drug dealing and gangs, could liken it to a play in a theater of the absurd.

But police are hoping a bold experiment will turn this ethnically diverse community into a stage of hope.

Without fanfare, a special team of 10 STOP (Selective Tactics of Policing) officers -- including Jennings and Headley -- have been roaming City Heights the past 10 months, defying the stereotype of the regular street cop. They don't have to answer to 911 dispatchers' calls to bank robberies or thefts. Their first priority isn't to pile up huge numbers of arrests or to issue citations.

Instead, they respond to complaints about drug dealing and gang fights. They call residents who make complaints, walk the streets and try to ferret out answers. Are the dopers moving from one building to another? Could the Fire Department slap a fine on the apartment owner?

Angel, Johnny and about 100 others plying the prostitution trade in City Heights have been wreaking havoc on apartment dwellers, giving drugs to some tenants in exchange for rooms. For several weeks, Jennings and Headley have been working -- successfully, they say -- to learn the extent of the problem.

Officials in San Diego believe that, with the STOP program, they are embracing "community policing" law enforcement practices being pushed by hundreds of municipalities around the country.

San Diego City Manager Jack McGrory, who plans to expand STOP programs into other communities, calls the policing method the "vanguard of the future."

Although some critics wonder if this is just another pie-in-the-sky plan that will fizzle under a glut of crime and budget woes, in City Heights skepticism and distrust of police
are slowly giving way to respect and admiration, thanks in part to STOP.

"The impression was before, 'they don't give a damn.' I can honestly say that residents seemed to hate the police officers. Now they walk with us," said Carol Seneff, a 47-year-old mother of seven and longtime resident of City Heights. Her home has been broken into three times and she has suffered through the mugging of her 14-year-old daughter within the past few years.

"Honestly, the STOP team is going to be our salvation in City Heights. At this point nothing else is going to save it," Seneff said. "When I moved here, the single biggest problem was traffic. Not anymore."

The STOP officers' work contrasts sharply with that of regular patrol officers, who must react to radio calls and file reports, sometimes at the expense of the big picture.

"What we are doing -- instead of the Police Department going into a community and telling people what the problems are, now the citizens are telling the police what they are and we are responding to them," said Sgt. Paul Dyrsen, head of the STOP detail at the Police Department's Eastern Division.

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Bounded by Interstate 805, El Cajon Boulevard and Fairmount and Euclid avenues, City Heights is a tapestry of staggering contrasts: 25 languages are spoken among the 90,000 black, Asian, Latino and white residents. The locals describe the community's ethnic diversity as a "rainbow within a rainbow and where everybody's a minority."

Over the past two decades, City Heights, a bedrock of single-family homes, evolved into an array of many apartment complexes, owned by absentee landlords, that became a magnet for drug dealers and gangs.

Last year, when City Councilman John Hartley proposed the community policing plan, City Heights had the worst crime rate in the city. In the two areas of City Heights where the STOP program began, the rate of violent crimes was more than double the citywide average of 10.78 per 1,000 residents.

In certain hard-core areas, neighbors pass on their own stories of fear and suspicion that never reach the newspapers. Stories of hearing gunfire in the night, of being threatened by drug dealers. Mothers wait outside their homes until their children arrive safely from school.

Their daily concerns are overshadowed by tragedies that make the headlines, such as the fatal shooting July 26 of Marine Cpl. Va Lee, a 22-year-old Persian Gulf veteran. He had been a victim of a drive-by shooting on 44th Street.

The presence of the STOP officers, coupled with renewed efforts to improve recreation,
library and neighborhood watch programs, has significantly boosted morale in City Heights, where crack houses are being shut down and city parks cleaned up, Hartley said.

The residents believe they are finally taking part in their own destiny, the councilman said.

In the past year, violent crime in City Heights has risen by 16 percent -- but 8 percent less than the year before. And City Heights has dropped from No. 1 in violent crime in the city to sixth out of 36 neighborhoods.

Sometimes people don't understand why the STOP officers are walking around, asking questions -- if no crime took place.

"People stare out at us like we're from outer space," said officer Headley. "They look at us, and say, 'what are you cops doing here? Did something happen?' It's weird."

For weeks, police believe, Johnny and Angel have been giving drugs to a tenant named Victor, described as a child-like man one step away from homelessness. One day last week, Jennings and Headley caught them in Victor's room, and ushered them out. No drugs were found.

"We're going to go back to the apartment until all those people are out of there," Jennings said. "They are abusing Victor. We're going to work to resolve this. We feel sorry for him."

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About 300 communities across the country, including New York, Miami, Houston, Boston and Baltimore, are embracing this type of "community" or "neighborhood" policing that forgoes traditional statistical measures of success -- such as arrests and response times -- to work with the community and deal with the underlying causes of crime.

In fact, the independent panel that evaluated Los Angeles police misconduct stemming from the Rodney King beating urged that the nation's second largest city adopt a community-oriented policing standard.

The Christopher Commission portrayed Los Angeles police as a force more concerned with response times and arrests that "isolated crime control over prevention" -- and thus isolated itself from the community, fostering resentment among officers and residents.

"I think the King incident will be seen as the defining moment in American policing -- that police must understand a community's cultural diversity to really be able to work out problems within neighborhoods," said one of the major proponents of community policing, Hubert Williams. He is former director of Newark, N.J., police, and head of the
Police Foundation, a Washington-based police research organization.

The police officer should be more a "problem solver than a crime fighter," Williams said. Community policing "is the way to go, we have not defined the book -- we are writing the book as we go along," he said.

San Diego police officials have been grappling with forms of community policing for two decades. As a lieutenant in 1972, Norm Stamper -- now executive assistant police chief -- wrote a paper advocating the community policing concept. The proposal eventually collapsed "because of a failure of every one of our support systems -- it was designed for failure," Stamper said.

Gradually, however, the concept became a part of San Diego police academy training. Over the years police launched "problem-oriented policing" -- in which some patrol officers took on special drug projects and continued investigating them to find the root cause of the problems. Various manifestations of police street-walking teams also came and went.

With STOP, however, city and police officials say they intend to begin making such neighborhood policing permanent in San Diego.

City Manager McGrory said he plans to expand STOP to five or six other neighborhoods by January. He said he expects to reassign or add 25 officers in STOP-type programs.

McGrory admits that community policing concepts throughout the country often faltered because "it's just been glitz. It was a nice public relations campaign."

A recent study of Houston's community policing showed flaws in its efforts, with confusion and skepticism among officers, and reduced response time.

To implement STOP and other neighborhood policing programs, McGrory said some services will be curtailed. Police have stopped responding to non-injury accidents and shoplifting complaints, and have plans to only take auto theft complaints over the phone, police officials said.

Harry Eastus, head of the San Diego Police Officers Association, which represents more than 1,800 rank-and-file officers, said he likes the concept of community-oriented policing, in theory. But he contends officers are receiving a mixed message.

"You can't tell them 'you've got a real problem, you've got a gang problem, let's go kick ass and take names, and then in two weeks or a month from now, we'll take you out of there and move you into a problem-oriented policing,' " Eastus said. "We'll be kinder and gentler."

Eastus referred to the recent surge in violent crime that forced city and police officials to concentrate more patrols in hard-hit areas, including City Heights . Eastus, whose
organization has long called for more police officers in the city, has criticized the efforts as a Band-Aid approach to policing.

"We can’t be all things to all people," Eastus said. "The same thing is happening to us (that) happened to L.A. They have had to work at the same level and made it a very efficient paramilitary organization. We are doing the same thing."

City officials have resisted adding more officers, and Stamper, for one, is trying desperately to remake the Police Department's paramilitary image. In a recent audit, he once again called for community-type policing.

When he was a patrol officer, Stamper said, he recalls "mindlessly patrolling, told to write reports, go back into service, take people into custody. Nobody asked the big questions: Why are there are more rapes? Why are there more burglaries?"

That must change, Stamper said. "We are on the verge of a quantum leap forward -- into the 1990s," he said.

Caption: 2 PICS
1. Officer Dave Headley, at right, talks with a suspected prostitute as Officer Dave Jennings fields a complaint. 2. Dave Headley, right, talks with Victor, a City Heights resident. Dave Jennings is in background. 1. The San Diego Union/Sean M. Haffey
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