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On Good Authority is a periodic briefing on trends and issues in criminal justice program evaluation. This report was written by Gerard F. Ramker, Ph.D., director of the Authority's Research and Analysis Unit. It is a summary of a program evaluation conducted by Tim Bynum, Ph.D., Scott Decker, Ph.D., and Dan Swift, M.S., of Justice Research Associates. Copies of the full evaluation report are available from the Authority's Research and Analysis Unit.

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Kankakee MEG unit employs problem-solving approach to combat drug crime

In January 1998, the Kankakee Metropolitan Enforcement Group (KMEG), a multijurisdictional drug enforcement task force, changed in dramatic ways. Under the direction of the Kankakee police chief and the Kankakee County sheriff, a problem-solving unit was added to KMEG. This group, referred to as the "overt" unit, was charged with responding to the day-to-day concerns of residents regarding the crime and disorder associated with drug dealing. Bolstered by a new chronic nuisance abatement ordinance, the overt unit provided an immediate response to neighborhood problems by focussing on landlord management, tenant screening, and drug problems that were of a smaller magnitude than those traditionally tackled by KMEG.

This report reviews the findings of a preliminary evaluation conducted by Justice Research Associates (JRA) examining the implementation and impact of this change on KMEG. The evaluation was funded by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority with federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act funds. The evaluation's conclusions were based on the evaluators' ride-alongs with the unit, interviews with law enforcement leaders and community leaders, and a review of KMEG data. Findings suggest that KMEG successfully engaged in problem-solving activities, garnered the support of elected officials and community residents, and generated higher

levels of arrest activity than its predecessor in the areas of drugs, gangs, and firearms.

Background

Multijurisdictional drug task forces have enjoyed broad acceptance across the nation. Nearly every state has implemented task forces of one form or another. It is estimated that more than 800 such units exist nationwide.

The KMEG unit serves the approximately 130,000 residents of Kankakee and Iroquois counties. The city of Kankakee, located about 60 miles south of Chicago, has a population of about 28,000. It has experienced many of the crime and social problems that plague larger cities. Shifts in the local economy led to the exit of several of the largest employers in the 1980s. The loss of steady, high-wage jobs had a number of negative economic consequences for the city, including increased poverty, a declining tax base, and decreased city revenues to provide services and respond to problems. As a result of these changes, Kankakee experienced a dramatic increase in crime, particularly violent crime. The homicide rate escalated in the early 1990s to nearly 100 homicides for every 100,000 residents, ranking among the highest in the state. In addition, a large backlog of unsolved homicide cases piled up, and many residents lost confidence in the police department.

In response to this situation, the city's newly hired police chief initiated a number of innovative programs in the mid-1990s including the formation of a Problem-Oriented Policing (POP) unit, enhanced training for problem-solving policing, a Citizen's Police Academy, and a Violent Crime Task Force. These programs resulted in enhanced relationships among law enforcement agencies and between the police and neighborhood residents, and laid the groundwork for significant changes in KMEG, a unit that had been active since the late 1970s.

Originally, KMEG engaged mostly in long-term surveillance and covert activities to build drug cases for prosecution in the Kankakee metropolitan area. However, the unit changed substantially in January 1998, adopting a more proactive, problem-solving approach. The KMEG policy board voted to add tactical/problem-solving teams to KMEG in early 1998, nearly doubling its size.

The hallmark of this new approach was a shift in emphasis toward suppression of street crimes and rapid response to neighborhood complaints. Consequently, more visible law enforcement operations have become the primary activity of the unit. KMEG has been active in nuisance abatement and in addressing other neighborhood concerns over minor crimes, as well as drug activities that focus on short-term neighborhood problems.

Another key feature of KMEG is its administrative structure. The director of the unit is a member of the Kankakee police department. Traditionally, and in nearly every other MEG in the state, an Illinois State Police (ISP) officer is the MEG director. Also, the detailed reporting system used by the ISP has been replaced by a simplified reporting process that, in the eyes of the Kankakee police chief and the sheriff, allows officers to spend more time on the street.

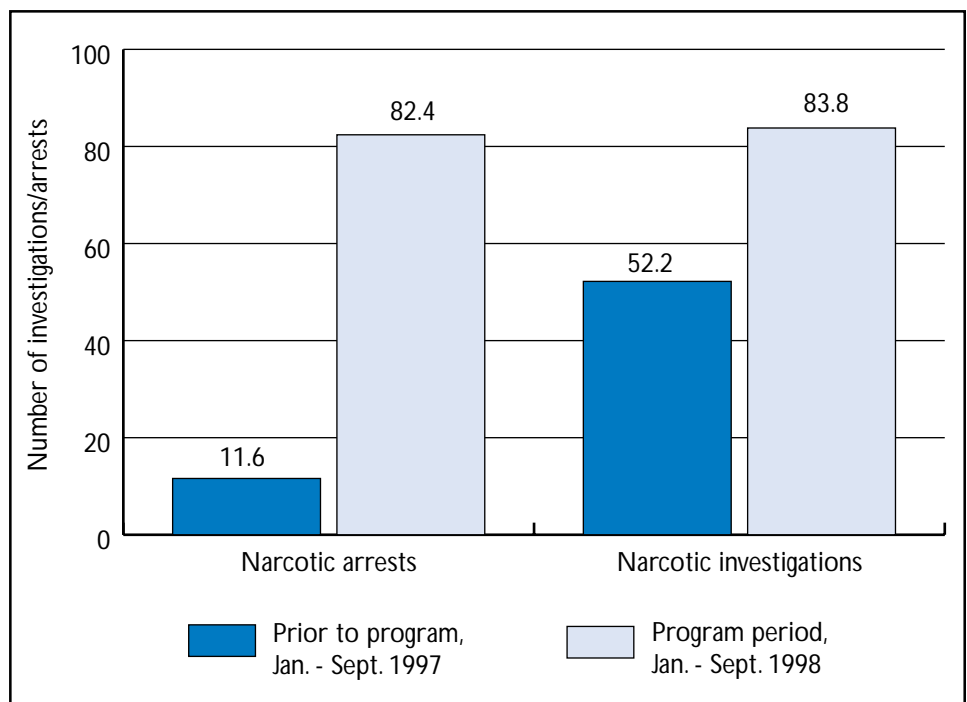
Implementation: key findings

- All of the individuals interviewed as part of the process evaluation strongly

Evaluation goals and methods	
The table shows three study goals identified by the evaluators, and the methods they used to reach those goals.	
Goal	Method
Determine the extent to which the goals of refocusing the KMEG project were adopted by its members, and the extent to which those goals were successfully communicated to the Kankakee community.	Interviews were conducted with community leaders, participants in KMEG, and the appropriate local police officials.
Determine the extent to which a community policing philosophy was been integrated into the KMEG unit.	Assessed through interviews and ride-alongs.
Examine overall impact of KMEG.	Statistical analysis of the number of complaints responded to, guns seized, search warrants executed, arrests made, gang contacts made, assets and narcotics seized, rate of drug delivery cases, and volume of nuisance abatement letters generated.

Figure 1

KMEG narcotic investigations and arrests: monthly average



endorsed the change in KMEG philosophy and direction.

- The centerpiece of the KMEG change in focus was the introduction of a Chronic Nuisance and Nuisance Abatement Ordinance. This ordinance was used to focus law enforcement attention on pressing problems identified by neighborhood residents. The ordinance has received broad-based support from neighborhood residents and community leaders.
- Interviews with elected officials revealed great familiarity with the work of KMEG and its reorganization. Those interviewed cited specific instances in which officers from the KMEG unit were mobilized to respond to neighborhood concerns identified by their constituents.
- Criminal justice personnel interviewed supported the reorganization of KMEG. The chief and the sheriff were strong supporters of the reorganized unit. However, the reorganization also required the cooperation and commitment of chiefs of surrounding departments. For the most part, the chiefs of surrounding departments were strong supporters of the new KMEG approach.

Impact: key findings

To assess the impact of the program, the evaluators examined monthly KMEG reports submitted to the Authority. The data covered the period January 1996 through October 1998. The evaluators compared the outcome measures of KMEG activities in 1996 and 1997 with the same time period for 1998:

Investigations

- The change in KMEG significantly increased the number of monthly narcotic investigations. There was a 73 percent increase in narcotics investigations for the program period compared to the pre-program period.

Offenses/arrests

- The number of narcotics arrests increased dramatically, from an average of 11.6 per month before the change in KMEG to an average of 82.4 per month

after the change, a 610 percent increase (Figure 1).

- Marijuana delivery and possession offenses increased dramatically. A similar pattern for opiate delivery offenses was observed following the reorientation of KMEG. Cocaine possession cases also increased dramatically after the change in the focus of KMEG.
- Contact with gang members increased dramatically after the change in the focus of KMEG in January 1998.

Convictions

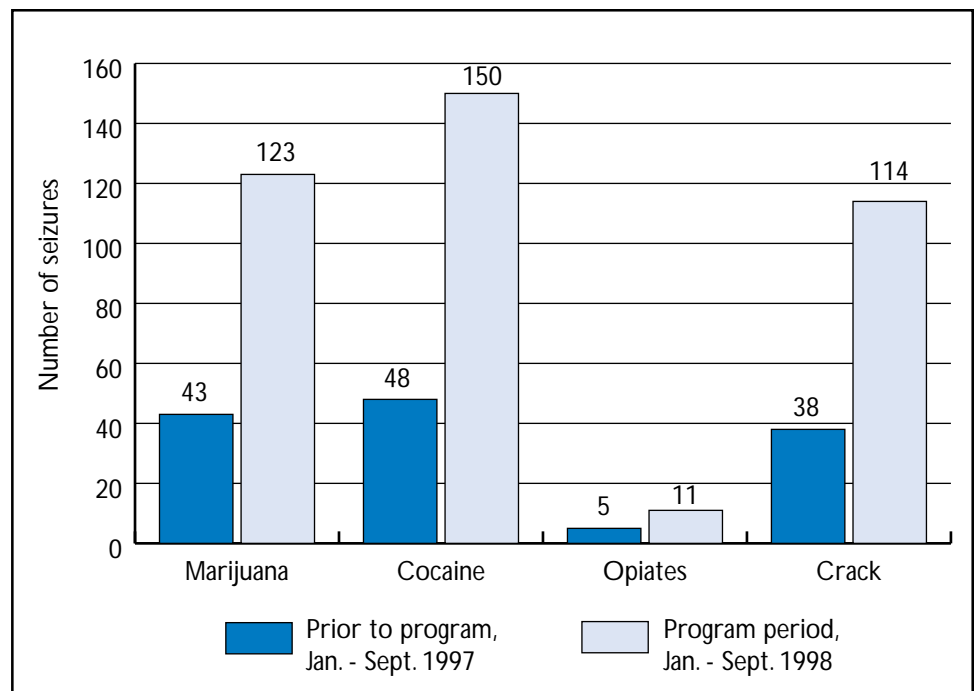
- On average, cases involving all three drug types — marijuana, opiates, and cocaine — showed lower conviction levels following the reorganization of KMEG. In addition, the disposition data showed somewhat lower levels of commitment to the Illinois Department of Corrections and county jail than prior to the reorganization. JRA noted that changes in convictions frequently lagged well behind arrest activity, and that, according to KMEG members, 1998 conviction levels reflected the quality

and quantity of arrest cases in 1997. Also, the evaluators noted that KMEG was not expected to produce more convictions for drug cases. Rather, it was designed to respond to citizen concerns and move problems out of neighborhoods before they required prosecution. Finally, the evaluators reported that drug possession cases, which dramatically increased under KMEG, were more likely to receive probation or be pled out.

Seizures

- The number of guns seized increased following the change in KMEG.
- Marijuana, cocaine, opiates and crack seizures increased significantly. Seizures for each of those drug types more than doubled in the program period compared to the pre-program period (Figure 2).
- Asset seizures increased significantly. The 86 asset seizures during the program period exceeded the 30 from a comparable period of time in 1997 by 187 percent.

Figure 2
KMEG drug seizures



Nuisance Abatement Activities

- The 309 nuisance letters sent by KMEG to landlords were substantial, considering the size and recent reorientation of KMEG. The use of such letters appeared, in general, to have increased during the evaluation period.
- KMEG enhanced its involvement in drug enforcement through the use of nuisance abatement. While long-term drug investigations remain important, and detective work continues to pay important dividends in the fight against drugs in Kankakee, these strategies fail to address many of the more immediate drug problems that concern residents. By their very nature, long-term investigations cannot satisfy residents' immediate concerns with loitering, drinking in public, and the drug sales that often accompany such behavior.
- The increased narcotics activity since January 1998, coupled with the increased contact with gang members,

underscored the utility of the nuisance abatement approach to drug enforcement in the Kankakee area.

Public awareness

- JRA found considerable evidence to support the conclusion that the public is increasingly aware of KMEG, its role in the community, and how to access its services. The evaluators reported that the proliferation of Citizen's Police Academy graduates across Kankakee has been a primary vehicle to increase awareness of KMEG.

Interagency cooperation

- The evaluators found a high degree of cooperation between the agencies inside and outside of KMEG, and the net effect of that cooperation was positive. Law enforcement leaders interviewed reported that KMEG was an effective vehicle by which officers learned of the crime and disorder problems in the broader community, enhanced their skills

as officers, and received additional training.

Conclusions

Justice Research Associates reported that the changes in KMEG have been strong and favorable. Their report indicates that the evaluation data examined was consistent with the hypothesis that the reorganized KMEG unit produced increased output measures and cooperation across a variety of agencies, some in law enforcement and some outside law enforcement. The key questions that remain, however, are sustainability and institutionalization. The evaluators felt that time would be the final judge on whether the impressive changes begun in Kankakee County can be sustained for the longer term and become a regular feature of crime control. To address these issues, the Authority funded a one-year impact study, which is to conclude with a final report in the spring of 2000. ♦

