



On Good Authority

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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 staff Research Analyst Karen S. Levy McCanna. It is a summary of an implementation and impact program evaluation of the Kankakee Metropolitan Enforcement Group. The evaluation was conducted by Scott H. Decker, Ph.D., Tim S. Bynum, Ph.D., G. David Curry, Ph.D., and Dan Swift, M.S., of Justice Research Associates. Copies of the evaluation are available from the Authority's Research and Analysis Unit.

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Specialized unit takes a problem-solving approach to crime in Kankakee

The Kankakee Metropolitan Enforcement Group (KMEG) is a specialized unit that operates overtly in addressing citizen-identified problem areas and covertly in developing large-scale drug investigations.

The Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority contracted for an implementation and impact evaluation of the KMEG using federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act (ADAA) funds. The operation of KMEG also is supported with ADAA funds. The evaluation, by researchers with Justice Research Associates, began in January 1998 and was completed in May 2000. This *On Good Authority* reviews the findings of the final evaluation report.

Methodology

The evaluation project was designed to provide a description of the KMEG structure, activities, and results. Researchers utilized ride-along observations, site visits, interviews, surveys, and file data to examine the effects of KMEG relationships and activities. Researchers explored the following six areas:

1) The relationship between the covert unit and the overt unit within the KMEG structure.

2) The relationships between KMEG, local police departments, and the community, as well as non-KMEG officer's perceptions of the KMEG unit.

3) Nuisance abatement activities, including landlord participation and the outcome of abatement cases.

4) The sustainability of the KMEG unit in its current form.

5) KMEG enforcement activities before and after a 1998 reorganization.

6) The perceived quality of KMEG cases by the Kankakee County State's Attorney's Office and the city attorney.

Description of KMEG

Since illegal drug activity does not adhere to geographical boundaries, metropolitan enforcement groups (MEGs) include personnel from several jurisdictions. MEGs historically engage in long-term surveillance and covert activities to build mid- to high-level drug cases for prosecution. The KMEG unit, which serves Kankakee and Iroquois counties, had been operating in this fashion since the 1970s.

In 1997 the Kankakee police chief and the Kankakee County sheriff met to discuss the needs of the

community and the activities of the MEG. A need to respond to trouble spots in the community with a more visible police presence prompted the reorganization of KMEG in 1998.

The reorganized unit incorporates the activities of a traditional covert unit alongside the activities of an overt response unit. The overt unit adopted a problem-oriented policing approach. Additionally, KMEG is supported by an assistant state's attorney to prosecute the state-level cases and a city attorney to prosecute the city-level cases. Four goals were identified for the reorganized MEG:

- 1) Have an impact on drug and crime through the use of traditional methods and civil sanctions.
- 2) Be responsive to the needs of local law enforcement agencies.
- 3) Introduce and integrate innovative strategies against gangs and drugs.
- 4) Respond to the needs of communities who contribute officers to KMEG, as identified by the residents of those communities.

Relationship between the covert and overt units

To assess the relationship between the covert and overt units, the researchers observed the two units within the KMEG office, during ride-alongs with the overt unit, and through interviews with command staff both internal and external to KMEG. The two units share the same office but operate separately. The separation of activity is attributed to the work necessities of each unit. The overt unit operates at night, openly addressing street sales of drugs and performing aggressive patrol activities. Consequently, the officers working in the overt unit are familiar to street criminals. Such familiarity would hinder the work of the covert unit, which operates primarily during

the day, following up on information to develop large-scale drug enforcement investigations.

Despite their separate work activities, the two units share information on a daily basis and have a great deal of interaction on cases. The researchers noted that the units could, and sometimes did, benefit by making a covert officer available during the working hours of the overt unit. Such access facilitates working with suspects who have been arrested and who are willing to provide information on other drug offenders.

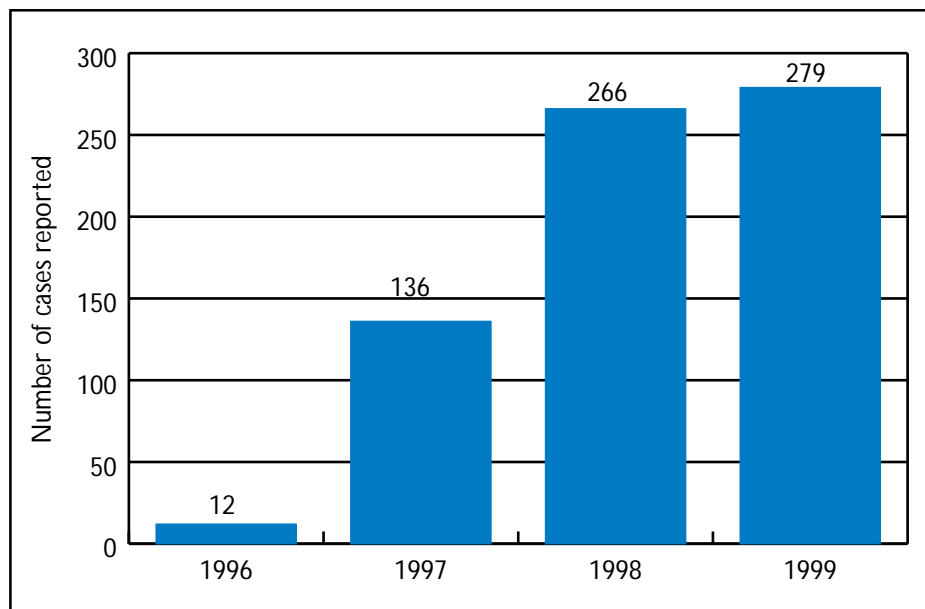
Relationship between KMEG, city police, and the community

Researchers interviewed 22 Kankakee police officers during ride-alongs. These interviews were designed to record the perceptions of KMEG by officers who do not work within the MEG unit. Most interaction between the MEG officers and other officers is initiated through the monitoring of radio traffic. The MEG officers respond to calls that involve drugs, crowd control, or calls for

assistance. Half of the officers interviewed felt the KMEG assignment was desirable. It was noted that officers assigned to KMEG received more training opportunities, had the freedom of not wearing a uniform, had the ability to conduct search warrants and seizures, and enjoyed more autonomy. Those officers who did not view KMEG as a desirable assignment noted the work hours (4:30 p.m. – 2 a.m.), and indicated that they thought KMEG was a difficult assignment to get. One suggestion for improvement of KMEG, made by officers interviewed, was to rotate officers in and out of the unit more frequently. This would allow more officers the benefits of working in the unit and guard against burnout for KMEG officers.

The researchers also interviewed 14 community leaders to assess community perceptions of KMEG. All of the community leaders interviewed indicated some level of familiarity with the KMEG unit. In general, they rated their perception of

Figure 1
Number of nuisance abatement actions by year



KMEG as “Very Good” or “Good.” None of those interviewed had a negative perception of KMEG.

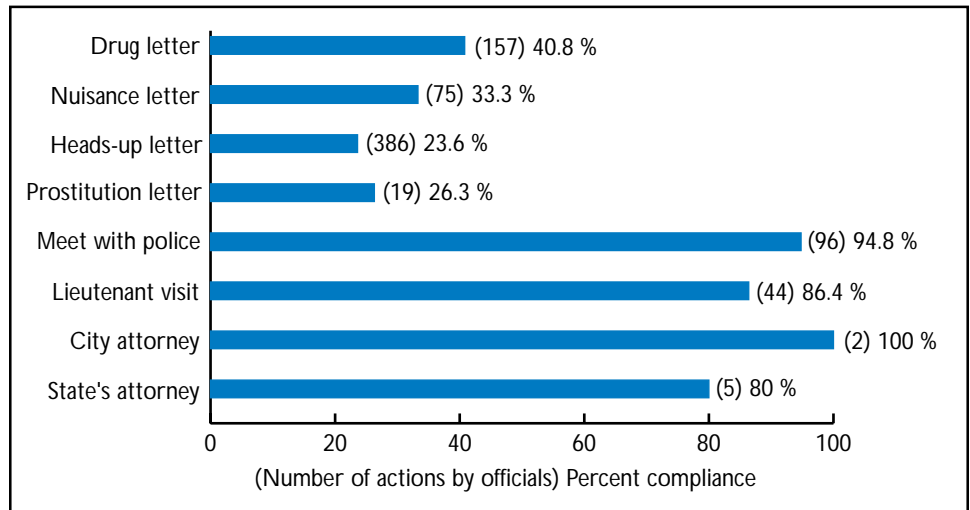
Chronic Nuisance Abatement Ordinance

The Chronic Nuisance Abatement Ordinance enjoys wide support in Kankakee and is viewed as the linchpin in the effort to combat crime and disorder in the community. The ordinance is used by KMEG and other police officers to address chronic problems at a large number of rental properties in the area. The number of nuisance abatement actions increased over time as police became more familiar with the characteristics and requirements of the law (Figure 1).

Once police have initiated a nuisance case, it is responded to administratively by the police department, city attorney, or assistant state’s attorney, depending on the nature of the activity. Initially, one of four types of letters is sent to the property owner, and the owner also may get a visit by police or have to meet with the city attorney or assistant state’s attorney. The largest category of letters were the “heads up” letters, which inform a landlord that a tenant has been arrested, even if the arrest was not on that property. The drug letter indicates that someone arrested on their property has been charged with a drug crime; the nuisance letter indicates circumstances in which a nuisance was found on the property; and the prostitution letter indicates that someone arrested for prostitution listed that address as his or her residence.

These letters notify the owner that criminal activity has taken place and encourage the owner to initiate abatement activity. If the owner neglects to address the issue or a second offense is reported, a second letter is sent to the owner advising

Figure 2
Responses by Kankakee officials to nuisance problems, and percent compliance with the specific requirements of those actions



that the property may be shut down unless other action is taken. Compliance often translates into the eviction of the troublesome tenant by the owner. Owners can get assistance with compliance through landlord informational conferences or meetings with police command staff.

Researchers examined the records of 697 nuisance abatement actions from late 1996 through 1999 (Figure 2). The most common action by officials, the heads-up letter, resulted in compliance with requirements stipulated by police in nearly 24 percent of the cases. Visits by police and meetings with prosecutors were less common, but yielded much better results.

Outcome measures

Outcome data was collected for periods before and after the February 1998 reorganization into overt and covert units.

Analysis of the data showed a dramatic increase in KMEG-initiated narcotics investigations and arrests following the reorganization of the unit. The analysis also indicated that after the reorganization more drug cases were being prosecuted and

more severe sanctions were being handed down for those cases.

Researchers also examined gang arrests and firearm seizures. The number of gang arrests increased dramatically from an average of one a month prior to the reorganization, to an average of six per month after the change. Firearm seizures rose from an average of two a month prior to the reorganization to an average of four per month afterward.

Quality of KMEG cases

Interviews were conducted with the assistant state’s attorney and the city attorney assigned to the KMEG unit to determine the quality of KMEG cases.

The majority of cases presented to the assistant state’s attorney originated in Kankakee and involved narcotics. The assistant state’s attorney indicated that during 1999 the 460 cases referred to the office from KMEG were consistently of high quality and compared favorably with other cases of similar charges.

The city attorney prosecutes a large number of KMEG-generated cases, especially cases resulting from

the nuisance abatement ordinance. The city attorney indicated that there was a great deal of diversity among the cases referred to him, but the majority of cases were filed against landlords. Of the more than 600 cases generated, fewer than 10 have gone to court. Landlords are generally appreciative to have the authority of the city behind them when attempting to rid themselves of problematic tenants.

Conclusions

The evaluation of KMEG indicates that the reorganization of the MEG to include an overt street crime unit resulted in an increase in the investigation, arrest, and prosecution of drug and gang-related offenders. Researchers also documented the role of a comprehensive approach to public safety in the revitalization of a number of Kankakee-area neighborhoods.

The integrated agency approach used by the KMEG has had a greater impact on crime than would have been possible had each initiative been implemented independently. Citizens had multiple opportunities to interact with police, which helped build positive community perceptions of the project. It is also important to note that the project focused on community concerns. The KMEG unit was structured to immediately respond to complaints of drug selling, and nuisance abatement was concerned with cleaning up properties and eliminating problems brought about by the presence of drug selling.

Through the reorganization of KMEG, the level of cooperation among area law enforcement agencies increased substantially. The new approach established more direct ties with communities in Kankakee county. A high degree of interaction

and a positive working relationship are important in creating a team approach to dealing with community problems.

Police administrators interviewed offered these suggestions to other jurisdictions considering similar efforts:

- Determine and analyze the specific problems faced in the local community.
- Respond directly and immediately to these problems.
- Implement changes in policing to address these problems.
- Implement changes in the way the community responds to problems.
- Use the MEG to change the way policing is done in your community. ♦

