CATCHING CAREER CRIMINALS

The Washington, D.C., Repeat Offender Project

SUSAN E. MARTIN and LAWRENCE W. SHERMAN

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National Institute of Justice
U.S. Department of Justice

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SPECIAL REPORT

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With support from the National Institute of Justice, the Police Foundation examined the effectiveness of the Washington, D.C., Repeat Offender Project (ROP). The two-year study of the special unit of about 60 officers documented how it operated, what it cost, and how well it achieved its goal. That goal was to "select, apprehend, and contribute" to the conviction of persons believed to be committing five or more Part I offenses per week.

A full technical report in manuscript form is available from the Police Foundation at the cost of reproduction. Discussion of specific aspects of the research also can be found in Vol. 3 No. 2 of *Justice Quarterly,* Vol. 24 No. 1 of *Criminology,* and Vol. 77 No. 2: Summer 1986 of *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology.* This report summarizes the research results and their implications for police efforts to focus resources on the repeat offender problem.

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CONTENTS

PREFACE 4

FOREWORD 5

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 6

INTRODUCTION AND MAJOR FINDINGS 7

POLICING CAREER CRIMINALS 8

ROP'S DESIGN AND INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION 8

ROP IN ACTION 9

RESEARCH DESIGN 10

FINDINGS 11

CONCLUSIONS 14

RECOMMENDATIONS 16

ENDNOTES 17

REFERENCES 18

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Arrests of Suspects Targeted by ROP and Randomly Assigned to ROP Investigation or Not 11

Figure 2: Mean Number of Prior Arrests of Arrestees 12

Figure 3: Percentage of Eligible New Cases Prosecuted as Felonies 12

Figure 4: Proportion of Convicted Arrestees Sentenced to Some Incarceration 13

Figure 5: Mean Number of Official Arrests by ROP and Comparison Officers in 1983 14

Table 1: Contingent Probability of Incarceration 13

PREFACE

Nothing in their work is more frustrating to police officers and administrators than the problem of chronic offenders who commit a disproportionately large share of the nation's crime but seem to revolve through the doors of the criminal justice system. Yet police departments traditionally have concentrated their crime-fighting resources on high-crime areas and certain types of offenses rather than on high-rate offenders. Perpetrator-oriented policing, in the jargon of the police trade, seldom was attempted until recently.

This report examines the Repeat Offender Project (ROP), the pioneering effort of the Metropolitan Police Department of Washington, D.C., to focus department resources squarely on repeat offenders. A special ROP unit was formed within the department to catch career criminals. The results of the unit's work, closely monitored by Police Foundation researchers for almost two years, are very encouraging. They portray the ROP approach as an important new crime control tool. Specifically, the results strongly indicate that ROP units can increase the apprehension, conviction, and incarceration of repeat offenders. ROP units, thus, can play a significant role in helping to rid the nation's streets and neighborhoods of these offenders.

Another result of the research on ROP is to open to question traditional police thinking about a standard gauge of police productivity. Many police administrators measure the productivity of their officers by the numbers of arrests they make. The findings in this report suggest that it is more useful to weigh the net impact of each arrest rather than just the total number of arrests.

A final observation: In forming and operating ROP units, the police must be cautious. As in many other aspects of policing, ROP units carry with them the potential for abuse of civil liberties. "Without careful supervision, there will be opportunity to harass, entrap, and otherwise violate a citizen's rights," the report's authors note. Thus, police chiefs and administrators have a responsibility to carefully safeguard civil liberties against potential abuses as they supervise ROP activities.

The Metropolitan Police Department of Washington, D.C., deserves great credit for being willing to put its new program to the rigorous test the Foundation's study entailed. From such willingness to embrace research comes significant benefit for all police agencies.

Hubert Williams
President, Police Foundation

FOREWORD

We hear reports every day that the volume of crime and criminal suspects is overwhelming the capacity of police, courts, and corrections to deal with crime effectively. But a close look at the phenomenon of the repeat offender suggests a real opportunity for the police and the rest of the criminal justice system to concentrate their resources where they are needed most urgently and, at the same time, avoid being overwhelmed.

Much of the crime we fear most is committed by repeat offenders. Many of the nation's investigations, arrests, prosecutions, and criminal trials are devoted to chronic offenders who are out on bail, on felony probation, on parole, or on early release into the community because of prison overcrowding. These relatively few offenders impose an immense burden on the criminal justice system. To prevail in its mission, the system must work "smarter, not necessarily harder," by removing repeat offenders from the community.

That is especially true of harried, overextended police agencies that can barely answer all calls for assistance. Working smarter means these police agencies must step back, examine their current crime control efforts, and resolve to keep high-rate offenders off the streets. That's what the Washington, D.C., police department did in planning and implementing its repeat offender program (ROP).

The National Institute of Justice is pleased to have supported the Police Foundation's evaluation of Washington's ROP unit. The evaluation is a first look at an important concept in crime control.

This report of the evaluation documents that the police can do more than react to individual criminal episodes; in the case of apprehending repeat offenders, they can take the offensive. The report shows that police organizations can focus their often scarce resources on predators who, crime for crime, day in and day out, are taking the greatest criminal toll on a community. To apprehend the offender who averages five or more serious crimes a week is, obviously, more productive for the criminal justice system—and more beneficial to the community—than apprehending the occasional thief or burglar.

As the report notes, given the magnitude of the repeat offender problem and the findings of this study, those departments that confront serious problems with high-rate offenders should consider creating repeat offender units. These units clearly offer an important alternative to traditional, reactive police strategies for dealing with crime.

James K. Stewart
Director, National Institute of Justice

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the contributions of a number of consultants, Police Foundation staff members, and Metropolitan Police Department personnel. Special thanks go to Carol Bridgeforth and Dennis Rogan who oversaw the data collection effort, Doug Smith who carried out a substantial portion of the data analysis, and Richard Berk, Thomas Cook and Albert J. Reiss, Jr. who, as members of the Executive Advisory Board, provided guidance throughout the study and helpful criticism of earlier drafts of the final report. The support of the Metropolitan Police Department throughout the project was exemplary; in particular we note the contributions of Chief Maurice Turner, Inspector Edward Spurlock, Charles G. Brown, and the officers of the Repeat Offender Project.

CATCHING CAREER CRIMINALS

The Washington, D.C., Repeat Offender Project

INTRODUCTION and MAJOR FINDINGS

Two facts stand out in modern crime control policy debates. First, a small proportion of criminals commits a disproportionate number of crimes. Second, most prisons are overcrowded. Together, these facts have generated growing interest in selectively focusing criminal justice system resources on the most active and dangerous chronic offenders.

While police have rarely adopted a proactive targeting approach to apprehending repeat offenders, the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Police Department adopted precisely this approach in May 1982 when it established an 88-officer (later reduced to 60) Repeat Offender Project (ROP).

Officers assigned to ROP use a variety of investigative and undercover tactics to apprehend high-rate offenders. ROP officers deliberately pursue two targets: offenders wanted on warrants (46 percent of arrests) and others believed to be actively committing felonies (24 percent of arrests). A third category is also arrested: those encountered serendipitously while officers are pursuing previously selected ROP targets (30 percent of arrests). Tactics for investigating warrant targets who can be arrested on sight include checking records, visiting residences, and interviewing relatives and associates. It was originally expected that continuous surveillance would be the primary tactic for arresting ROP-initiated targets. But when surveillance yielded few arrests and led to officer frustration, ROP abandoned this tactic and adopted a mixture of other investigative methods (buy/bust, using informers, etc.).

The Repeat Offender Project offered a unique opportunity to assess the problems and effectiveness of a proactive police unit formed to carry out a selective apprehension strategy. Between January 1983 and December 1984, the Police Foundation, in cooperation with the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department, conducted a multifaceted evaluation to assess ROP's effectiveness and costs. A controlled experiment sought to determine whether "repeat offenders" identified by ROP were more likely to be arrested by ROP than they were in the absence of ROP activities. A comparative component examined prior arrest histories and current case dispositions of a sample of persons arrested by 40 ROP and 169 non-ROP officers, as well as arrest productivity rates for both groups of officers.

The Police Foundation study addressed the following questions:

1. How does ROP operate and what strategies do officers use in selecting and apprehending their targets?
2. Do ROP's tactics increase the likelihood of arrest for targeted repeat offenders?
3. Are offenders arrested by ROP officers more active and serious than offenders arrested under routine police operations?
4. Are ROP arrestees more likely to be prosecuted, convicted, and incarcerated? And,
5. How does ROP affect the arrest productivity of its officers?

The study found that:

- ROP substantially increased the likelihood of arrest of the persons it targeted.
- Those arrested by ROP officers had longer and more serious prior arrest histories than a sample of those arrested by non-ROP officers.
- ROP arrestees were more likely to be prosecuted and convicted on felony charges, and more likely to be incarcerated than non-ROP comparison arrestees. And,
- ROP officers made only half as many total arrests as non-ROP comparison officers, but made slightly more "serious" arrests.

While it is premature to conclude that all police departments would benefit from a proactive repeat offender unit, large departments should consider creating such units given the magnitude of the repeat offender problem and the findings of this study.

POLICING CAREER CRIMINALS

Since the publication of research indicating that a small proportion of criminals commits a disproportionate amount of crime (Wolfgang et al., 1972; Petersilia et al., 1978; Williams, 1979; Chaiken and Chaiken, 1982; and Greenwood with Abrahamse, 1982), a variety of criminal justice efforts have begun to selectively identify and incapacitate "career criminals" or "repeat offenders," although projects define these terms differently.

The police may be mobilized to enforce the law either reactively, i.e., in response to citizen complaints, or proactively, i.e., on their own initiative (Reiss, 1971). Traditionally, most police actions have been reactive. In responding to citizen complaints, the officer's primary task is detecting the occurrence of a crime and identifying and apprehending the perpetrator either at the scene or through subsequent investigative tactics. Proactive efforts generally have been limited to investigating vice and other offenses for which there are no complainants or victims (Black, 1973; Moore, 1983; Wilson, 1978; Williams et al., 1979).

In recent years, the police have become more proactive through Abscam-type and sting operations, and efforts to control police and political corruption. The success of these initiatives has prompted suggestions that proactive tactics be more widely applied to efforts to reducing street crime.

Programs focusing on career criminals may employ various combinations of reactive and proactive tactics. To date, reactive tactics have focused on serving warrants against identified "career criminals" (Gay et al., 1984), notifying prosecutors when identified career criminals are arrested, and developing additional witnesses, evidence, or information about other cases pending against an offender (Gay, 1983; McElroy et al., 1981; Felony Augmentation Program, 1981). Proactive tactics have included the use of decoys, surveillance, buy/bust schemes, and phony fencing operations (Pate et al., 1976; Wycoff et al., 1980; Felony Augmentation Program, 1981; Bowers and McCullough, 1982; Gay with Bowers, 1985).

Although police administrators have expressed interest in career criminal initiatives, few departments have adopted career criminal programs. A 1983 survey identified only 33 such programs of which less than half involved proactive tactics (Gay with Bowers, 1985). Little is known about how these programs actually operate or their effectiveness.

ROP'S DESIGN AND INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION

When Maurice Turner, chief of the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Police Department, requested innovative proposals from senior officers on ways to reduce crime in the nation's capital, Captain (now Inspector) Edward Spurlock responded with a plan to establish a proactive, "perpetrator-oriented" unit. The unit would identify and apprehend two types of active recidivists: those already wanted on one or more warrants who could be arrested on sight, and those believed to be criminally active but not currently wanted. The former were called "warrant targets;" the latter came to be called "ROP-initiated" targets.

ROP's Initial Organization

ROP's criterion for selecting both types of targets was "the belief that the person is committing five or more Part I offenses[1] per week." The unit's time and effort would be divided equally between the two types of targets. Active apprehension efforts were limited to a 72-hour or less time period. This enabled ROP to focus its resources on the most active criminals, since only very active offenders were likely to be observed committing a crime within a three-day period.

ROP's command staff selected a team of 88 officers who varied in age, race, sex, appearance, and previous police experience. The officers were organized into seven-member squads, each including a female and a detective. The squad was led by a sergeant, and became the basic work group to which targets were assigned and credit for arrests given. While officers were allowed ample discretion over their routine activities, the sergeant was responsible for selecting squad targets and worked on the street with officers. A Target Committee of three experienced investigators was responsible for developing new targets and reviewing candidates generated by the squads.

The unit's resources included 20 old cars, other surveillance and investigative equipment, and a computer terminal linked to the department's on-line information system. To aid in target selection, ROP routinely received copies of the department's daily major violators list, criminal histories of recent arrestees, daily crime reports from each district, and specially prepared weekly printouts listing all persons wanted on three or more felony warrants.

To reduce rivalry with other police units that could inhibit the flow of information needed to function effectively, ROP adopted an internal arrest log. This log listed all arrests for which ROP officers were responsible, even if the arrest was formally booked to another officer. This enabled ROP officers to assign formal arrest credit to other officers while obtaining recognition from their supervisors for the work they had performed.

Prior to commencing operations, ROP's proposed procedures were reviewed by the department's general counsel, the U.S.

Attorney, and the local American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The ACLU was concerned that ROP would be a "dragnet" operation that harassed and entrapped people. These concerns were satisfied when the ROP commander explained that ROP would use no formula or profile for target selection and that places where citizens have a right to privacy would be put under surveillance only with the permission of the court (Epstein, 1983).

Operational Changes

Difficulties during the first several months led to several modifications of ROP's targeting practices, squad operations, and apprehension tactics. The ROP design anticipated that surveillance would be the principal tactic for apprehending ROP-initiated targets. When constant surveillance failed to produce arrests and, therefore, frustrated ROP officers, the squads increased their proportion of warrant targets to about 75 percent of those selected. The command staff also gradually broadened the officers' repertoire of investigative and undercover infiltration strategies and skills. After several months, surveillance became one of a number of tactics. In addition, the rule that work on a target be terminated after 72 hours was relaxed when it proved difficult to implement.

Target development practices also changed. Initially, the Target Committee selected and developed all targets, mostly on the basis of official record information. However, this information typically was incomplete and an unreliable indicator of criminal activity, and, therefore, was far less desirable than "street" information. With strong encouragement from the ROP command staff, ROP officers built informal information networks and fostered cooperative relations with other units and agencies.

After several months, the unit acquired a reputation for responding to suggestions for targeting and "hot tips" from other police units and informants. Information sources in other departmental units and neighboring police agencies and street informants increased the proportion of targets generated by ROP squads. These squads also initiated a number of joint target investigations with other agencies.

These changes had both positive and negative effects. They allowed ROP to expand its resources and become a center of information about criminal activities in the metropolitan area. But they also resulted in targeting persons who did not meet ROP's selection criteria, diverting limited resources away from a focus on persons committing many Part I offenses.

After six months, to streamline operations, ROP was reduced from 88 to 60 officers, the 12 squads were reorganized and reduced to eight, and administrative procedures were tightened. In January 1983, a new theft statute (The District of Columbia's Theft and White Collar Crime Act of 1982 [4-238]) went into effect. At that time, ROP's target selection criteria were expanded to include "persons believed to be trafficking in stolen property."

ROP IN ACTION

Target Selection

Although officers were expected to select criminally active targets, ROP did not establish formal indicators of activity or any system for prioritizing among potential candidates. Selection was based on informal understandings about what makes a "good" target.

Common considerations affecting selection became the target's catchability, deservedness, longer-term yield, and the squad's working style.[2] "Catchability" depended primarily on the quality, recency, type, and amount of information about a warrant target's whereabouts and a ROP-initiated target's activities. ROP officers preferred to use information provided by other officers or an informant. Police recognize that most offender arrest records fail to reflect the full extent of criminal activities. They believe that only criminals in the criminal environment really know what is going on, and that this information helps reduce the amount of preliminary investigation required.

"Deservedness" was related to an officer's belief that the target deserved to be arrested and punished. The primary factors contributing to deservedness were the seriousness and length of the target's criminal history and alleged current criminal activity. Another factor was the target's apparent contempt for the law and police. The former was exemplified by failing to appear in court; the latter encompassed those who were armed or belligerent when arrested on a previous occasion. Concern with "deservedness" helps explain why ROP officers tended to select older persons and suspected fences as targets. Older persons showed a clearer commitment to crime and had an observable modus operandi (in addition to being more likely to be incarcerated if convicted). Fences, although generally not violent, support and facilitate street crime by providing a market for stolen property.

"Yield" was measured by a target's contribution to ROP's information network and public visibility, and the likelihood that the target would result in additional targets and arrests, or in the immediate incarceration of the arrestee. For example, those persons already on pretrial release for another offense and/or on parole were desirable targets because they were more likely to be kept in jail.

ROP squads tended to use three styles for meeting informal pressures to make arrests, and these styles became factors which affected target selection. "Hunter" squads focused almost exclusively on warrant targets, particularly those wanted for violent crimes. "Trapper" squads, which accounted for most ROP-initiated arrests, preferred to initiate their own longer-term investigations. These investigations focused on one key target and were designed to close a large number of cases, recover large amounts of stolen property and, subsequently, arrest as many of the target's criminal associates as possible. While an

investigation was proceeding, "trappers" also "filled in" with warrant targets, particularly those requested by officers from other units with whom they were working. "Fisherman" squads did not specialize. They made some ROP-initiated arrests on quick buy/bust operations, followed up on "hot tips," arrested some warrant targets, and made many "serendipitous" arrests by street cruising.

Apprehension Strategies

The primary task in apprehending warrant targets was locating the target. This was simple if the squad had a current address. But when the officers did not have a good address, the process became more complex. Finding the target usually involved reviewing police and other records or contacting persons likely to know the target's whereabouts. While some contacts were straightforward, others involved deception. For example, a target's relative might have been told that the target had just won a contest or was being considered for a job and must be contacted. Records to be checked included those at the post office (e.g., mail forwarding requests), the Department of Motor Vehicles, and the phone company (after getting a court order to gain access to the latter). If these efforts failed, officers sometimes placed the target's girlfriend or close associates under surveillance.

Most warrant targets were wanted in Washington, D.C., as fugitives from justice in neighboring jurisdictions or on felony bench warrants for probation or parole violation or for failure to appear in court. Such targets were frequently selected because they met all informal targeting considerations. They were more catchable than other targets for two reasons. First, D.C. residents being sought by officers from neighboring jurisdictions could be easily located through information provided by these officers. Second, non-ROP D.C. officers were less likely to seek out fugitives and persons wanted on bench warrants than those wanted for Part I crimes, despite the seriousness of the underlying charges against the former. In addition, these arrests strengthened cooperative ties between ROP and other units.

To arrest persons not wanted on a warrant, ROP officers had to develop evidence about a specific crime in which targets had participated. This involved a variety of vice and investigative activities such as buy/busts, cultivating informants, investigating "tips," placing targets under surveillance, and tracing stolen property found in a target's possession to its rightful owner. A few prolonged investigations involved undercover penetration of fencing operations. While quite diverse, ROP-initiated target investigations generally focused on property crimes which were more highly organized and, therefore, more easily penetrated through informants and undercover tactics.

Analysis of ROP apprehension activities and their outcomes indicated that there was no consistent formula for or primary tactic associated with arrests. Most ROP arrests were made quickly (80 percent within one week of targeting) and did not involve extensive investigative efforts.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Experiment

Three research components were used to assess ROP's effectiveness. First, an experiment was conducted to determine whether those selected by ROP as "repeat offenders" were more likely to be arrested because of ROP efforts than they would otherwise. The experiment's design required ROP officers to identify their constantly changing pool of targets, pair any two of the same target type (warrant targets or ROP-initiated targets) and, by coin toss, assign one target to the experimental group and the other to the control group. Experimental targets were investigated by ROP squad officers over a seven-day period. Control targets were off-limits to ROP officers but could be arrested by any other police officer during the seven-day period. The experiment lasted 26 weeks, during which time 212 pairs of randomly assigned targets were investigated.

As is common in field experiments, evidence suggests that some ROP officers manipulated the coin toss (which research staff did not always control) to ensure immediate assignment of desired targets. Others avoided the coin toss, by getting the Target Committee to treat the target as an authorized exception even though it did not always fit the rules for exception. In addition, there were difficulties in locating non-ROP arrests, suggesting that some arrests were missed by the researchers. Nevertheless, statistical adjustments designed to eliminate the potential impact of manipulation of random assignment and missed non-ROP arrests did not alter the significance of the experimental outcome.[3]

Comparative Study

The second research component compared ROP officers with a sample of other officers on three factors: 1) criminal histories of those arrested; 2) court dispositions of these arrests; and 3) overall arrest productivity of the officers. ROP officers in this study included 40 officers previously assigned to patrol, tactical/crime prevention, vice, and detective units. The comparison group included a random sample of 95 officers drawn from patrol, vice, and detective assignments; all 60 officers in tactical/crime prevention units; and 14 officers with warrant squad duties. Data were collected on each of the three factors for both groups over two time periods: April 1 to September 30, 1981 (prior to the 1982 establishment of ROP), and April 1 to September 30, 1983.

Information regarding all arrests made by ROP and comparison officers during both time periods was collected from station house arrest logs and the special ROP arrest log. Samples of about 300 ROP-1981, Comparison-1981, and Comparison-1983 arrests were then randomly selected for comparison with all 263 ROP-1983 adult arrests. Arrest histories were obtained from the Metropolitan Police Department. Information on case dispositions was obtained from the Criminal Division of the Superior Court.

First, a regression analysis[4] was used to compare ROP and comparison officers' 1983 arrest productivity, after differences in officers' 1981 arrest rates, district, and assignment were statistically controlled. Second, the type and seriousness of arrest charges of ROP and comparison officers were compared for both time periods. Third, the dispositions of the three arrest samples were compared with those of the 1983 ROP group to determine whether ROP officers' cases in 1983 were more likely to result in prosecution, conviction, incarceration, and longer sentences than they had been in 1981, and more likely to produce these results than 1983 cases in the comparison sample. An additional analysis using a regression model examined the same outcomes after controlling for arrest type, officer's assignment, arrestees' ages, and prior arrest records.

Fourth, arrest histories for ROP and comparison officers' 1981 and 1983 arrestees were compared to determine whether, in 1983, ROP officers' arrestees had longer and more serious prior arrest records than those of the offenders they had arrested in 1981, and longer and more serious arrest records than the comparison officers' 1983 arrestees.

Observation and ROP File Data

A third research component involved extensive observation of ROP officers at work, and provided information about ROP target selection, investigative techniques, and apprehension strategies. Various data items also were collected from case jackets of all persons targeted by ROP during the study period. This included 289 persons involved in the experiment, 100 targets that were authorized exceptions, and 85 persons whom ROP officers serendipitously arrested while working on other assigned targets.[5]

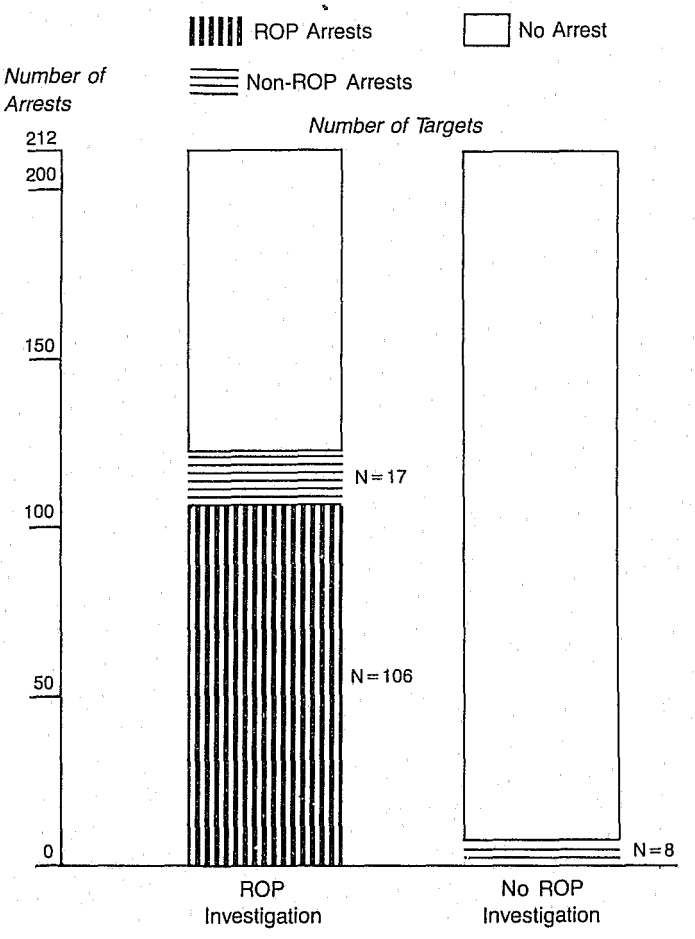
FINDINGS

Experiment

The experimental results clearly showed that *ROP increased the likelihood of arrest of targeted repeat offenders*. As indicated in Figure 1, ROP arrested 106 (50 percent) of the 212 experimentals. In contrast, only 17 experimentals (8 percent) and 8 controls (4 percent) were arrested by officers in other units. This difference was statistically significant.

Differences in ROP and control arrest rates were found for both warrant and ROP-initiated targets. Fifty-five percent of the warrant targets eligible for ROP arrests were arrested by ROP, while only 9 percent of warrant targets eligible for non-ROP arrests were arrested by non-ROP officers. For ROP-initiated targets, the comparable figures were 47 percent and 6 percent. *The magnitude of this finding suggests that despite several problems in implementing and sustaining the experimental design, ROP made a difference by increasing the likelihood of arrest for both warrant and ROP-initiated targets.*

Figure 1: Arrests of Suspects Targeted by ROP and Randomly Assigned to ROP Investigation or Not



Prior Arrest Histories of Arrestees

The study next examined the criminal histories of the samples of 1981 and 1983 ROP and comparison officers' arrestees, after making adjustments for officer's district and assignment and arrestee's age. In 1981, differences between the number of prior arrests for each group's arrestees were minor. *However, in 1983, ROP arrestees had twice as many prior arrests per arrestee as comparison officer arrestees.* As shown in Figure 2, ROP 1983 arrestees had an adjusted mean of 8.4 total prior arrests, while comparison officers' arrestees had only 4.2, a statistically significant difference. ROP arrestees in 1983 had significantly more arrests per arrestee than comparison officers' arrestees for all Part I and robbery offenses. Assignment to ROP thus led to the expected change in criminal history characteristics of those arrested by ROP officers. The prior arrest records of ROP officer arrestees between 1981 and 1983 became significantly longer and more serious, while the criminal records for arrestees became somewhat less serious.

These differences are even more pronounced when ROP arrestees are broken down by target type. Persons deliberately targeted by ROP (i.e., both experimentals and authorized exceptions) had 7.5 prior arrests at the time they were initially targeted, while those serendipitously arrested by ROP officers had only 3.7 prior arrests. There was no difference between the prior records of warrant targets and ROP-initiated targets.

Arrest Seriousness and Case Dispositions

In examining ROP arrests and their outcomes, the study first looked at the seriousness of the arrest charge. There was little difference between ROP and comparison arrest charges in 1981. In 1983, while charges by officer group did not differ in most categories, two categories did differ. Twenty-six percent of ROP arrestees were charged as fugitives, escapees, or probation or parole violators in contrast to only 8 percent of comparison arrestees. Fifteen percent of ROP arrestees and 30 percent of comparison arrestees faced such minor "other" charges as sexual solicitation, gambling, disorderly conduct, unlawful entry, violating vending regulations, and traffic offenses. *Overall, ROP arrests tended to be for more serious offenses.* But because very few arrests in these categories were prosecuted as new cases, this difference does not appear in the following disposition data.[6]

The dispositions of the samples of arrests made by ROP and comparison officers were then examined to determine if ROP officer arrestees were more likely to be prosecuted, convicted, and incarcerated. In 1983, there were substantial differences between case outcomes of ROP and comparison officers' arrests, after adjusting for offense type, offender's age, and arrest history. These differences were not found in 1981 cases.

Although the proportion of cases accepted for prosecution did not change between 1981 and 1983 (see Figure 3), *there was a*

Figure 2: Mean Number of Prior Adult Arrests of Arrestees (adjusted for officers' district and assignment and arrestee's age)

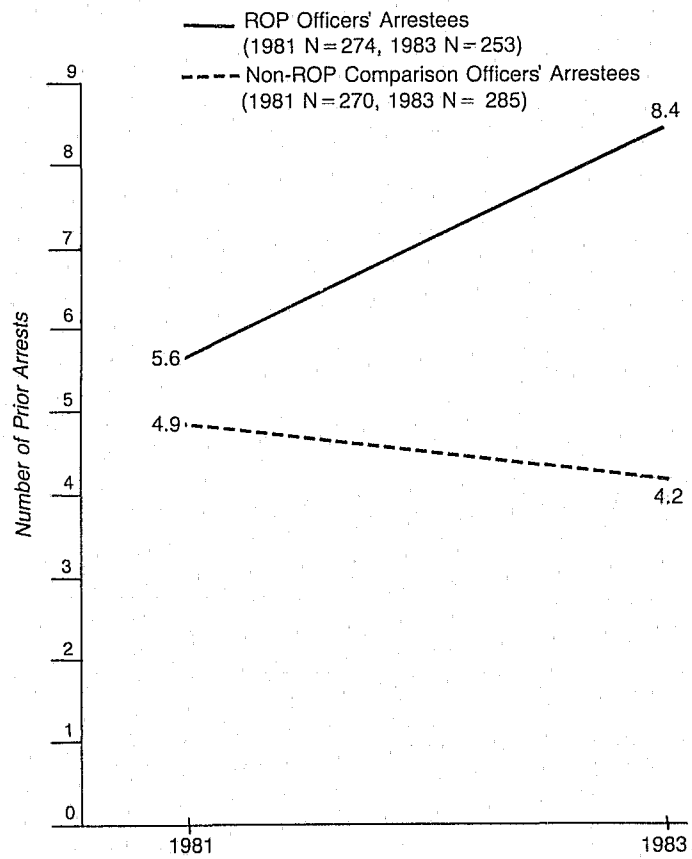


Figure 3: Percentage of Eligible New Cases Prosecuted as Felonies

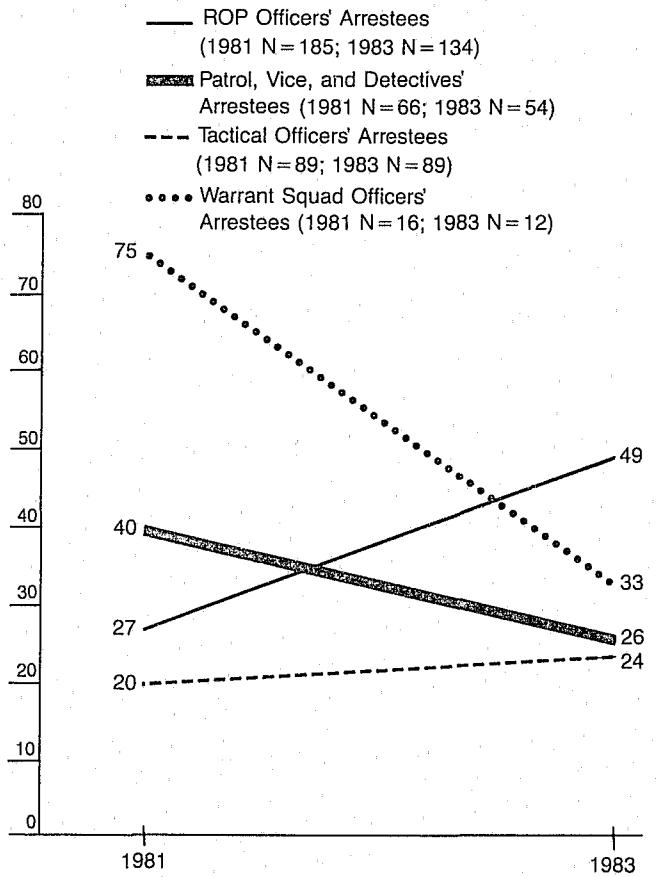


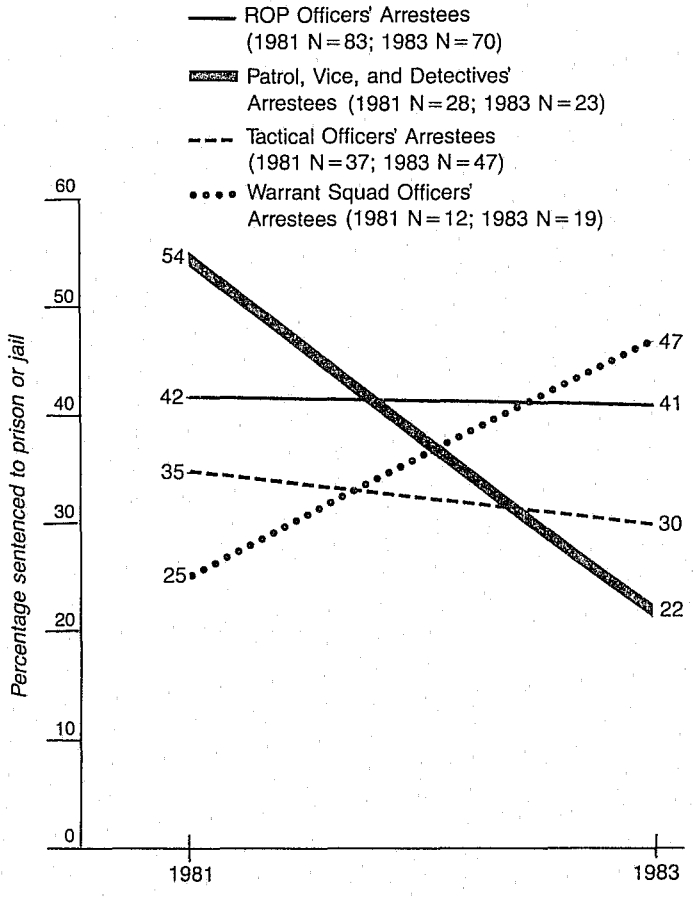
Table 1: Contingent Probability of Incarceration

	ROP-81			Comparison-81			ROP-83			Comparison-83		
	New	Bench Warrant	Total	New	Bench Warrant	Total	New	Bench Warrant	Total	New	Bench Warrant	Total
Conviction	.41	.50	.42	.40	.44	.40	.37	.64	.41	.26	.50	.32
Prosecution	.23	—	.23	.20	—	.20	.30	—	.30	.16	—	.16
Arrest	.16	.38	.18	.17	.15	.17	.19	.44	.21	.12	.38	.16

substantial increase in the proportion of the ROP officers' new cases accepted for prosecution as felonies. At the same time, the proportion of the sample of comparison officers' cases prosecuted as felonies fell for officers in all assignments except casual clothes tactical units. As a result, 49 percent of ROP's new cases were accepted for prosecution as felonies while comparison cases charged as felonies in 1983 ranged from 24 to 33 percent.

Total convictions increased from 49 percent of case outcomes in 1981 to 63 percent in 1983 for both ROP and comparison officer groups. The proportion of misdemeanor convictions increased for both groups as well. *However, the proportion of felony convictions resulting from ROP officer cases increased from 19 to 24 percent of all prosecuted cases,* whereas the proportion of felony convictions in comparison officers' case outcomes decreased for officers in patrol, vice, and detective assignments and increased for those assigned to tactical units and the warrant squad.

Figure 4: Proportion of Convicted Arrestees Sentenced to Some Incarceration



As Figure 4 indicates, incarceration rates for 1983 ROP arrestees remained at about the 1981 level. The rates for comparison officers in all other assignments fell, except for the warrant squad. Although warrant rates rose substantially in 1983, the number of cases involved was quite small.

Conditional probabilities of incarceration given arrest, prosecution, and conviction for both new and previously-charged bench warrant cases were calculated in order to display variations in outcomes by type of case, officer group, and year. Table 1 indicates that the differences in the likelihood of incarceration between 1981 ROP and comparison officers cases were small, while in 1983 the differences were substantial.

For example, in 1983 30 percent of new ROP cases that were prosecuted, and only 16 percent of new comparison cases that were prosecuted, resulted in incarceration. Similarly, 64 percent of all ROP's bench warrant arrestees that were convicted were sent to prison or jail compared with 50 percent of comparison bench warrant arrestees that were convicted.

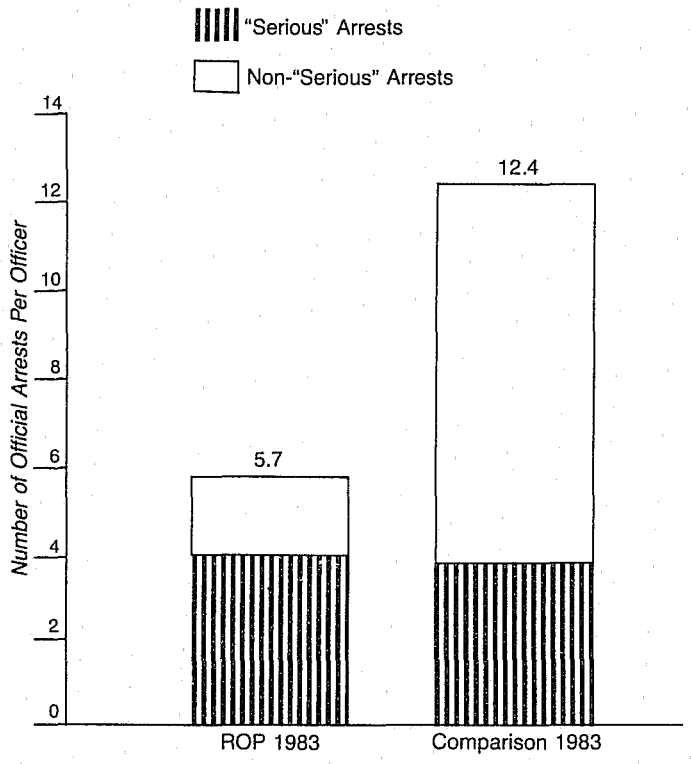
After statistically controlling the data for offense type, age, and criminal history, the study found that ROP arrestees sentenced to serve time in 1983 appear to have received longer sentences than comparison officer convictees. This apparent effect on sentence length is probably a result of the more serious conviction offenses of ROP arrestees within each of the broad categories of offenses used in this study.[7]

Effects on Officer Arrest Productivity

The third component in the comparative study explored an issue of particular importance to many police administrators: the effect of ROP assignment on officers' productivity as measured by total and specific types of arrests. Changes in the individual arrest rates of each ROP and comparison officer were examined by using two different measures for ROP arrests, and by statistically controlling for differences in district, assignment, time in ROP, and 1981 arrest productivity.

Both measures revealed that *assignment to ROP decreased the total number of arrests made by an officer.* Using the more conservative measure, the study found that in the six month period in 1983, ROP officers made an adjusted mean of 5.7 arrests per officer and comparison officers an adjusted mean of 12.4 arrests (see Figure 5), a statistically significant difference. While ROP officers also made significantly fewer Part I arrests than comparison officers in 1983, there was no difference in the number of "serious" arrests (i.e., arrests for Part I crimes plus those for distribution and possession with the intent to distribute drugs, weapons charges, and arrests on a felony bench warrant), based on the conservative measure of arrests.[8]

Figure 5: Mean Number of Official Arrests by ROP and Comparison Officers in 1983* (adjusted for district, assignment, time in ROP, and 1981 individual arrest rate)



*Analogous figures including all arrests are a mean of 5.9 total and 5.7 serious arrests for ROP officers and 13.1 and 4.1 total and serious arrests respectively for comparison officers.

CONCLUSIONS

By most measures used in this study, the ROP unit appears to have achieved its goals of selecting, arresting, and contributing to the incarceration of repeat offenders. It increased both the likelihood of arrests of targets, the seriousness of the criminal histories of its arrestees, the probability of prosecution for a felony, the chance of a felony conviction, and the length of the term of those sentenced to incarceration. However, several factors suggest a cautious interpretation of these findings, and the need for other departments to recognize the potential dangers in adopting the ROP model of perpetrator-oriented proactive policing.

Costs

Creating and operating ROP involves costs that cannot be overlooked. First, it took approximately $60,000 in direct expenses to equip the unit. Second, ROP decreased its officers' arrest productivity and, in all likelihood, other aspects of police service as well. Most forgone arrests, however, tended to involve minor offenses such as disorderly conduct and traffic charges. The rate at which ROP officers made "serious" arrests was unaffected, however, and may have increased if the less conservative measure is a more accurate indicator. Thus, the trade-off appears to be reduced order maintenance activities in exchange for a focus on crime-fighting activities.

The Criminal Activity of Targets

Although ROP arrestees had longer criminal records than comparison arrestees, it cannot be assumed that ROP arrestees are the most active 20 percent of all offenders or are committing five or more Part I offenses per week. Other studies have found that prisoners with longer criminal records are more likely than those with short records to be among the highly active group. But prediction instruments, particularly those using official record information, are often unreliable when selecting high rate criminals (Chaiken and Chaiken, 1982; Greenwood with Abrahamse, 1982; Cohen 1983; Chaiken and Chaiken, 1985).

Chaiken and Chaiken (1985), for example, used prisoners' self-report of their criminal activities to distinguish three groups of prisoners: "high rate winners," "high rate losers," and "low rate losers." Most of the self-admitted high rate criminals were "losers" who were often caught and had long criminal records. A small group of "high rate winners" had avoided apprehension for many years, however, and had official records that made them appear to be low rate criminals. At the same time, a group of inept "low rate losers" were not very active but were apprehended nearly every time they committed a crime. The Chaikens suggest that while it is not possible to distinguish accurately among these three groups solely on the basis of criminal record, police and prosecutors have access to additional knowledge that may help them make more accurate distinctions.

This is likely to have been the case with many ROP targets. Criminal history data were generally supplemented by street information upon which ROP officers heavily relied, as well as by data regarding drug use, information from criminal associates, and confessions by targets to many crimes cleared by police but not charged by prosecutors. These sources of information enhanced their ability to select the most criminally active targets. Nevertheless, it was impossible to determine what proportion of ROP targets actually met that unit's targeting criterion of five or more Part I crimes per week. More important, the ultimate goal of the ROP unit is to reduce crime, and the data from this study do not permit us to determine whether changes in the D.C. crime rate during the study period were related to the program or to other factors. (The D.C. crime rate has declined modestly since ROP was initiated; however, this occurred in most big cities during the study period.)

Legal, Ethical, and Policy Issues

ROP activities also pose dangers to civil liberties, especially because of the use of undercover tactics. A proactive plainclothes unit using a variety of unorthodox tactics gives officers an enormous amount of discretion. Without careful supervision, there will be opportunity to harass, entrap, and otherwise violate a citizen's rights.

These problems appear to have been minimized through the ROP supervisors' and officers' careful attention to legality. ROP officers recorded undercover transactions whenever possible and frequently consulted with the U.S. Attorney's office when preparing warrants and carrying out covert operations. Both Inspector Edward Spurlock of the ROP unit and Leslie Harris of the ACLU reported that between May 1982 and September 1985, ROP avoided lawsuits and major complaints of harassment and violation of due process. Nevertheless, the same degree of care may not prevail in other jurisdictions. Nor is it certain that the procedures used by the D.C. ROP unit will stand the test of time.

Proactive units must also make difficult policy choices, either deliberately or by default. These include finding comfortable balances between the emphases to be placed on quantity and quality of targets and arrests, between warrant and unit-initiated targets, and among various types of targets and offenses.

Informal pressure to "put some meat on the table" (i.e. make more arrests) has implications for the type of targets and arrests produced. Emphasis on the number of arrests made results in greater temptations to pick "easy" targets that fail to meet ROP's targetary criteria (i.e., persons wanted for less serious offenses, street level drug addicts and dealers, petty fences and thieves). An exclusive focus on selecting and arresting only the most active targets, however, is likely to increase the quality of each arrest but decreases their number. Because such a strategy also increases the amount of personnel and other resources devoted to each target, a "failure" (i.e., selection of a low rate offender or failure to make an arrest) has higher costs and makes accuracy an even more critical part of the target selection process.

Similarly, there is no formula for finding a balance between warrant and unit-initiated targets. The amount of emphasis put on the former must rest, in part, on the effectiveness of existing warrant service procedures and an examination of the types of offenses and offenders left at large in the community due to a failure to serve outstanding warrants. Additionally, warrant targets already "wanted" by the system are likely to pose fewer legal challenges than those initiated by the unit. Warrant targets also are more likely to be a source of violent offense arrests and to require less officer time and fewer resources per arrest. An emphasis on warrant targets wanted for violent crimes is also likely to yield a greater proportion of targets detained prior to trial, prosecuted for felonies, and incarcerated if convicted given the greater seriousness of the charges underlying these arrests.

Warrant targets also entail several disadvantages relative to unit-initiated targets. They "belong" to the officer who obtained the warrant and, therefore, yield the unit less information about other crimes and criminal associates upon which to base subsequent targeting activities. The quality of a warrant case depends on evidence developed by another officer. Conversely, proactive investigations enable the police to develop eye witness evidence and penetrate organized criminal activity networks. Only through systematic proactive efforts are the police likely to develop cases against major fences, professional thieves, and other "high rate winners."

Difficult policy choices also must be made when a proactive unit decides on which types of criminal activities to focus. For example, ROP initiated an investigation of area-wide shoplifting activities that resulted in closure of more than 40 cases in five jurisdictions, recovery of more than $100,000 in stolen property, and more than a dozen arrests. The targets clearly fitted the selection criteria; there was ample evidence that they were committing more than five Part I offenses per week. Yet, most of the drug-addicted professional shoplifters arrested were neither armed nor violent. The question is thus balancing potential crime control and other community benefits achieved when apprehending organized, active property offenders against the benefits of apprehending fewer persons believed to be committing violent crimes.

Applicability of the Findings to Other Settings

There are also problems in generalizing from the findings of a single case study. What worked for ROP may be related to the unique characteristics of Washington, D.C., its police department, and ROP's personnel and leadership. In the absence of other comparative units or groups, it is difficult to determine which aspects of ROP's organization and tactics are idiosyncratic, which may be effectively replicated in a different setting, and which might better be altered.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the study indicate that other large urban police departments would do well to consider creating specialized units focused on repeat offenders. Obviously, such proactive police units must address specific local crime problems, fit available departmental resources, and comply with constitutional safeguards. A 60-person ROP unit is costly and probably far larger than needed by all but a handful of major cities. Careful attention must also be paid to balancing proactive and reactive tactics, and to the types of crimes or criminals on which to focus.

Adequate administrative controls must be used when planning target selection. Productivity pressure for quick arrests might encourage officers to ignore targeting criteria and selection procedures. Using informants to gain knowledge about community criminal activity carries the danger that informants rather than the organization will shape targeting priorities. The D.C. ROP unit constantly struggled with these problems. In fact, one of the largely unanticipated benefits of the experiment was increased administrative oversight of target selection. Several administrative changes prompted by the Police Foundation's experiment were retained after the research was completed, and a rudimentary system for prioritizing among potential targets was adopted as well.

This report leaves many questions unanswered. Further research is needed, for example, to determine the effectiveness of ROP's selection procedures and to estimate its crime control effect. Other studies might examine the optimal size of such a unit, taking into account both direct and indirect costs[9] as well as crime control benefits. Nevertheless, this study provides some encouragement for police to develop a selective apprehension strategy. If street information does provide the best means of identifying and apprehending highly active offenders, then the Washington, D.C., ROP program and others like it might have a major impact on serious crime.

ENDNOTES

1. Part I offenses include homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, auto theft, and arson.

2. The terms "catchability," "deservedness," and "yield" as well as characteristics of the squads mentioned in the next several paragraphs were coined by the researchers on the basis of 10 months of observation of ROP officers. They are not terms used by ROP officers themselves.

3. To test the potential impact of the manipulation of random assignment and of missed non-ROP arrests, the experimental findings were recalculated after making two adjustments. First, because a ROP insider estimated that 10 percent of the coin tosses had not been random, we conservatively doubled that estimate and assumed that 20 percent of the coin tosses had not been random. For that reason, we eliminated 42 pairs of targets that resulted in ROP arrests but not in non-ROP arrests. Second, we assumed that ten control arrests were overlooked and added ten arrests to the non-ROP totals. These adjustments did not alter the significance of the experimental outcome. Additional tests comparing experimental and exceptional targets indicated that where they differed, the former appeared to be more criminally active. Finally, because the findings of the comparative and observational components of the study supported the experimental results, confidence in the validity of the latter increased.

4. Regression analysis is a statistical technique that predicts one outcome (or dependent variable) measure using a "best fitting" linear combination of several predictor (or independent variable) measures.

5. Although there was a total of 424 targets involved in the experiment, some persons were targets more than once so that 289 persons were included. In addition, the number of arrests reported in the experimental and comparative parts of this study differ slightly. Juvenile arrests were not included in the comparison component; some experimental arrests were eliminated from the experimental component because the control mate was found to have been ineligible for the coin toss.

6. This fact also helps explain the apparent discrepancy between the total number of arrests and the number shown in Figure 3. Fugitives, probation and parole violators, and escapees as well as persons who failed to appear at any point during the processing of the case all were arrested on a bench warrant and excluded from the figure.

7. For the case disposition analyses the following categories were used: violent (including homicide, rape, aggravated assault, and robbery); property; weapons; drugs; bench warrant; and other offenses.

8. The analyses were done twice, using different measures of ROP arrests. The first measure, total arrests, included both those officially credited to the unit as recorded in departmental arrest books, and unofficial arrests as recorded in the internal log maintained by the ROP unit. This latter group included arrests that ROP officers brought about but did not actually make (e.g., they convinced someone to turn himself in), those they "gave" to another assisting officer, and those in which they participated that occurred outside of Washington, D.C. The second measure, official arrests, included only arrests formally credited to ROP officers in the departmental arrest book. Use of either the official or total arrest measure involved introducing contrasting biases. Because ROP officers were strongly encouraged to formally credit arrests to others, to work jointly with officers in other departments, and even to participate in raids and arrests outside of D.C., the official arrests measure systematically depressed ROP officers' actual productivity. The total arrest measure, on the other hand, inflated ROP officers' arrest rates relative to those of comparison officers who may have contributed to others' arrests but got no such informal recognition for doing so.

To be conservative, the data presented in Figure 5 and discussed in the text are based on the official arrest measure, which understates to an unknown degree ROP officers' true arrest productivity. Statistical tests based on the total arrest data (see footnote in Figure 5) indicated that the 1983 individual Part I arrest rates of ROP officers and comparison officers did not differ from each other and that the individual "serious" arrest rate of ROP officers was significantly higher than that of comparison officers.

9. Prominent among the indirect costs are the costs associated with police services foregone.

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