

CNA Spotlight

Strategic Approaches to Violent Crime

The Arlington, Texas Police Department's Operation Safety Net

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Contents

Introduction: The Arlington, Texas Police Department	3
Operation Safety Net	5
Challenges	6
Successes	7
Moving Forward	8
Lessons for Other Agencies	9
About CNA	10

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Introduction

The Arlington, Texas Police Department



This report is part of a series highlighting innovative programs that have been implemented in some of the most progressive police agencies across the country. These reports will highlight some of the nation’s most innovative best practices in violent crime reduction; focused deterrence; gun violence prevention; officer safety and wellness; community and public safety partnerships; and the use of technology, intelligence, and analytics to reduce violent crime. Each of these reports provides background on the program, details the important components of the program and the agency’s approach, highlights the successes the agency has experienced as a result, and identifies ways other agencies can employ similar programs.

This report highlights the Arlington (Texas) Police Department’s Operation Safety Net initiative. CNA worked closely with the Arlington Police Department to develop this publication, including a site visit in June 2018 to observe and speak with participants about the initiative.

The Arlington Police Department (APD) has more than 600 sworn personnel and is led by Chief Will Johnson. Since his appointment in 2013, Chief Johnson has refocused APD’s mission: today’s APD strives to increase legitimacy and reduce violent crime by building trust in the community through transparent action, positive

engagement through leveraging technology, geographic policing, and employee development. Johnson has made numerous strides toward increased transparency, enhanced community outreach efforts, renewed training efforts focused on procedural justice, and numerous public safety and community outreach efforts. Most recently, the APD has renewed an emphasis on reducing violent crime by combating illegal guns and drugs and targeting known offenders¹ Operation Safety Net (OSN), first conducted in 2016, contributes to this focus by using an intelligence-based response to target robbery-related offenders.

1. Roberto Villasenor and D. Rodriguez, *Safer Neighborhoods through Precision Policing Initiative: Arlington (Texas) Police Department* (Washington, DC: CNA, 2018).

Figure 1. Arlington robbery rates, 2014–2016

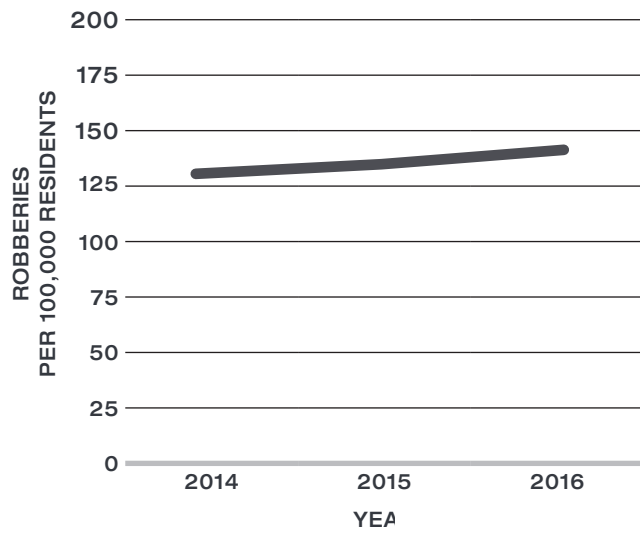
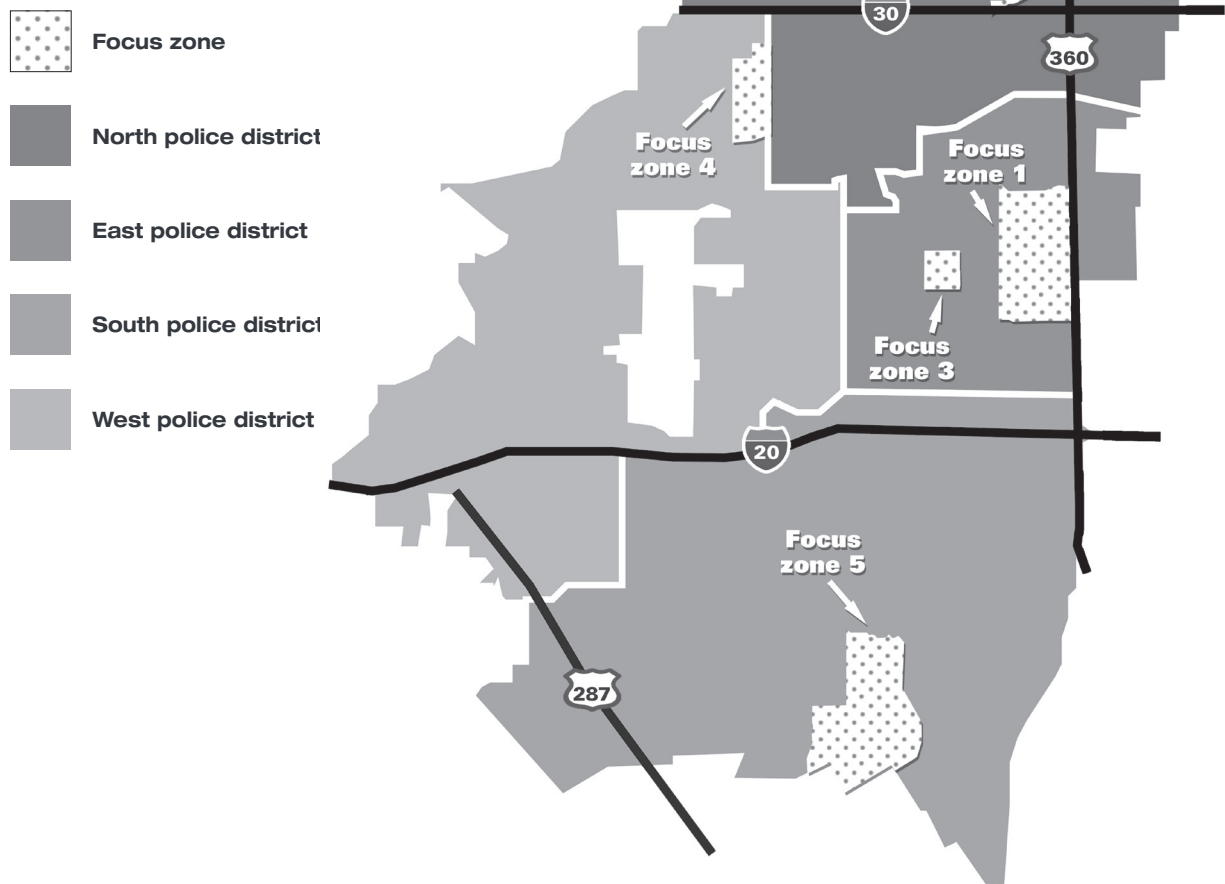


Figure 2. Map of Arlington



Operation Safety Net

Robbery rates in Arlington have increased from 128.73 per 100,000 residents in 2014 and 136.49 in 2015 to 141.85 per 100,000 residents in 2016.² Total robberies increased from 493 to 557 over the same timespan.

In response, the APD conducted Operation Safety Net (OSN) for 28 weeks in 2016, from March 21 to October 1.³ OSN was an intelligence-based multidisciplinary task force focused on specific robbery offenses and offenders.⁴ Patrol officers assigned to the task force also performed their normally assigned district operations under their assigned commanders throughout OSN; this approach increased collaboration among regional and federal partners, which helped address offenders crossing jurisdictional boundaries.

The APD expended 12,944 resource hours on OSN. The task force included representatives from the department's crime analysis unit (CAU), Hot Spot Enforcement Action Team (HEAT), Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Team, robbery investigations unit, gang unit, and Tactical Intelligence Unit (ATIU). As well, it brought in partners from the U.S. Marshals Service; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement Homeland Security Investigations; the Drug Enforcement Administration; the Federal Bureau of Investigation; Texas Department of Public Safety; and neighboring police departments such as Fort Worth and Grand Prairie.

OSN began with the CAU identifying five focus zones within the city. This was the CAU's first time actively planning an operation—an important milestone for APD internal cooperation. In another first for the APD, the focus zones were defined by not by beats, but police reporting areas (PRA)—geographic areas that may cover multiple beat boundaries. To draw the zones, the CAU conducted a three-year analysis of robbery data across the City of Arlington to determine which areas had the highest robbery and gun violence rates.

Armed with detailed information on the focus zones, OSN participants deployed strategies that included saturation patrols, covert units for surveillance, and rapid warrant service for known offenders. This was one of the first times the APD had used intelligence and coordinated a multidisciplinary approach to solve an issue. The APD continued to use this multidisciplinary approach with the second iteration of OSN in 2017.

Both iterations of OSN enhanced intelligence sharing with field personnel to ensure that officers had the most up-to-date information and that commanders could easily deploy resources to hot spot locations.⁵ To that end,

2. Analysis of robbery rate increases based on annual FBI Uniform Crime Report data, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/ucr-publications>.

3. Latesha Watson, Arlington Police Department Informational Memo addressed to Chief Will Johnson, October 8, 2016.

4. Villasenor and Rodriguez, *Safer Neighborhoods: Arlington*, (see note 1).

5. Zhivonni McDonnell, "Department Launches City-wide Taskforce to Address Robberies," press release, Arlington Police Department, March 21, 2016, <http://www.arlington-tx.gov/police/2016/03/21/departments-launches-city-wide-taskforce-to-address-robberies/>.



Ott Cribbs Public Safety Building, Arlington, Texas

OSN produced weekly intelligence updates; these reports went through several iterations APD found the most appropriate and useful format. The CAU conducted weekly meetings with command staff and zone commanders to review the intelligence reports, trends, and other important information.

Another key component of both iterations of OSN was public cooperation. The APD issued photographs of robbery suspects and videos of active offenders to aid in their identification and location. The department also conducted community outreach through its line-level officers—APD command staff developed scripts and trained officers to use them in interactions with community members, including those suspected of crimes and those who might have information about crimes. With the scripts, line officers can provide consistent messaging to the community about OSN.

Challenges

When planning for OSN, the APD did not merely target gun violence and robberies, but identified the specific crimes that OSN would focus on, such as robbery with a gun, aggravated assault with a gun, deadly conduct with a gun, and other related offenses. Like many police departments

nationwide, the APD had difficulty obtaining agreement on a common definition of specific crime categories. Non-fatal gun crimes, in particular, are often difficult to classify—for example, agencies often debate whether shootings that result in injury or the discharge of a firearm that results in no injury should be included within the nonfatal shooting category. Relying on CAU analysis, however, the agency was able to specify not only *what* crimes to target, but *who* was likely to commit gun offenses, and *where* and *when* those offenses were likely to occur. These planning discussions involved officers, supervisors, the CAU, and the overall OSN commander.

Another challenge was maintaining resource and personnel deployment levels throughout the 28-week operation. Because robbery offenses were spread across the city, it was difficult to maintain the increased presence and enforcement activity with which the operation began. Resources and personnel also had to be reallocated to other areas at some points during the operation.

In addition, officers initially resisted the geographic focus of the operation. To overcome this resistance, the APD overlaid the geographic focus with a focus on offenders and provided feedback to the officers on the individuals who were arrested as a result of their efforts. This feedback helped officers understand the utility of the CAU's targeted information. Officers were also more receptive to the operation when command staff explained the “why” behind it.

OSN encountered several additional challenges during its second iteration in 2017. This iteration centered on the command level, where the previous operation had involved district-level staff and lower-ranking officers. This difference affected communication and officer buy-in and responsiveness. Involving officers at all levels of the department is an important component of this kind of operation. Each iteration also used different analysts, which changed the processes, procedures, and formats of the weekly

intelligence reports and meetings. The analysts overcame these continuity challenges by implementing consistent and standardized processes for intelligence communication; the APD learned that these standards will ensure data is understandable and consistent, regardless of who prepares the report.

Successes

While the two iterations of OSN were implemented using different approaches, both operations achieved positive results. As the APD's capacity and needs (such as staffing and leadership) changed, so too did the implementation approach, but the overall objectives and goals of the operation remained the same for both iterations.

As a result of OSN, the APD increased clearance rates for robbery cases. In the six months prior to OSN (October 2015–March 2016), robbery clearance rates averaged 41 percent. During OSN (April 2016–September 2016), clearance rates averaged 53.66 percent; an increase of approximately 12.66 percent. After the conclusion of OSN, clearance rates declined again to 35.66 percent. In addition to the positive impact on robbery clearance rates, the APD also made a total of 639 arrests, seized 57 weapons, made 198 gang member contacts, seized over 413 grams of contraband substances, issued 1,617 citations, cleared 501 outstanding APD warrants (totaling \$233,596.53), and achieved overall reductions in violent criminal offenses citywide. The greatest effects were seen



Arlington Police Department Crime Scene Investigator photographing evidence

during the first eight weeks of the operation.⁶ These changes were seen both within the focus zones and on the periphery of each zone except Zone 1, which did not exhibit these reductions.

The operation provided opportunities for coordination with local, regional, and federal partners. Internally, the intelligence sharing between the CAU, ATIU, patrol personnel, and investigations personnel of APD improved considerably. The CAU not only gave patrol and commanding officers critical data to plan and execute OSN, but highlighted its own strengths and abilities, laying the groundwork for increased use of intelligence in future. The data collection processes developed for OSN were used to update APD's CompStat process. In addition, the OSN scripts positively affected community-police relationships. Most community members received the OSN scripts positively, even thanking officers for providing them information on the operation and explaining why it targeted specific areas.

Moving forward

Although the APD has no immediate plans to conduct another OSN, it has applied the lessons learned to other issues. The planning and development of OSN has already begun to serve as a template for future operations. For example, APD recently implemented Operation Freeway SAFE (Strategy Against Fatality Events). This operation

intends to reduce the number of vehicle collisions on major roadways throughout the city. The APD Traffic Unit is initiating a fatality and injury crash reduction program that includes all sections of the Traffic Unit and coordinates with the four patrol districts. As in OSN, the CAU conducted a data analysis of all fatality and injury crashes that occurred throughout the city to identify the top 10 locations of crashes.

Moving forward, APD plans to pair offender-focused crime analysis with location-focused analysis for operations similar to OSN. The CAU will continue to develop and enhance this capability through training, for use in future operations and to inform how it reports data during CompStat meetings. The APD also plans to continue coordinating with internal and external partners during operation planning implementation.

The department now actively uses data in a way it never did before. It has developed a data dashboard that allows the department to view data from very specific crime and geographic perspectives, which better informs command officers on how and where to deploy resources for the greatest effect on crime. APD officers and commanders now have more ownership over how data is interpreted and used in the field, allowing them to be more strategic in their policing approach.

Intelligence runs
operations and
operations provide
intelligence.

– Lt. Pugh, APD Traffic Unit

6. Latesha Watson, Memo to Chief Will Johnson (see note 3).

Lessons for Other Agencies

The APD offers the following recommendations to agencies considering a similar operation:

- **Include the crime analysis division and data in the planning stages of the operation.** This was critical for the effectiveness of OSN. The first iteration of OSN involved intensive planning, coordination with internal and external participants, and data use. This process was refined during the second iteration of OSN. An operation of this nature requires both intelligence and commitment.
- **Keep the intelligence report format and media types simple and engaging.** Initially, the CAU included several pages of information and graphs in the weekly intelligence reports. These reports were eventually condensed down to only the necessary information.
- **Allow flexibility to change the intelligence report format and content.** This allows the department to capture and disseminate the appropriate information as the operation progresses. New focus areas or approaches may be adopted to increase the program's effectiveness. It is important to allow the report format to evolve with these changes.
- **Allow flexibility to alter the zones and change boundaries.** Altering the focus zones and changing boundaries as peak crime areas change allows the department to continue to combat the target crime once it has moved out of a targeted area. While the ability to alter focus zones is an important capability, all zone changes should have an explanation supported by data.
- **Inform the community of intended enforcement activities.** This can be accomplished through media broadcasts, social media, town hall meetings, and officer scripts. Ensuring that the community is informed of these law enforcement activities can increase cooperation, trust, and police legitimacy.

APD encourages agencies considering running an operation like OSN to be thoughtful and deliberate during the planning stages. It is important that officers and the community alike understand the purpose of an operation of this nature.

About CNA

CNA is a not-for-profit organization based in Arlington, Virginia. The organization pioneered the field of operations research and analysis 75 years ago and, today, applies its efforts to a broad range of national security, defense, and public interest issues, including education, homeland security, public health, and criminal justice. CNA applies a multidisciplinary, field-based approach to helping decision makers develop sound policies, make better informed decisions, and lead more effectively.



Chief Will Johnson (back row, thrid from right) and other Arlington Police Department officers

The Arlington (Texas) Police Department's Operation Safety Net initiative, conducted in 2016 and 2017, was an intelligence-based task force response to robberies and related offenses, such as gun crimes. This Spotlight report outlines the process of forming and deploying the task force, its results, and advice for other agencies considering similar programs.

This series of Spotlights highlights innovative programs implemented in progressive police agencies across the country. These reports showcase best practices in violent crime reduction; focused deterrence; gun violence prevention; officer safety and wellness; community and public safety partnerships; and the use of technology, intelligence, and analytics to reduce violent crime.



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