

CNA Spotlight

Comprehensive Approaches to Violent Crime

The San Antonio, Texas Police Department's Violent Crime Task Force

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San Antonio, TX Police Department

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Introduction

The San Antonio, 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; approaches to gun violence; 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 San Antonio (Texas) Police Department (SAPD)'s Violent Crime Task Force. CNA worked closely with the SAPD to develop this publication, including a site visit in May 2018 to speak with department personnel about the initiative.

San Antonio, the second-largest city in Texas and seventh-largest city in the United States, has an estimated population of nearly 1.4 million people. The SAPD, led by Chief William McManus, is the second-largest municipal police force in the state of Texas, comprising about 2,000 sworn personnel and 1,000 civilian employees.

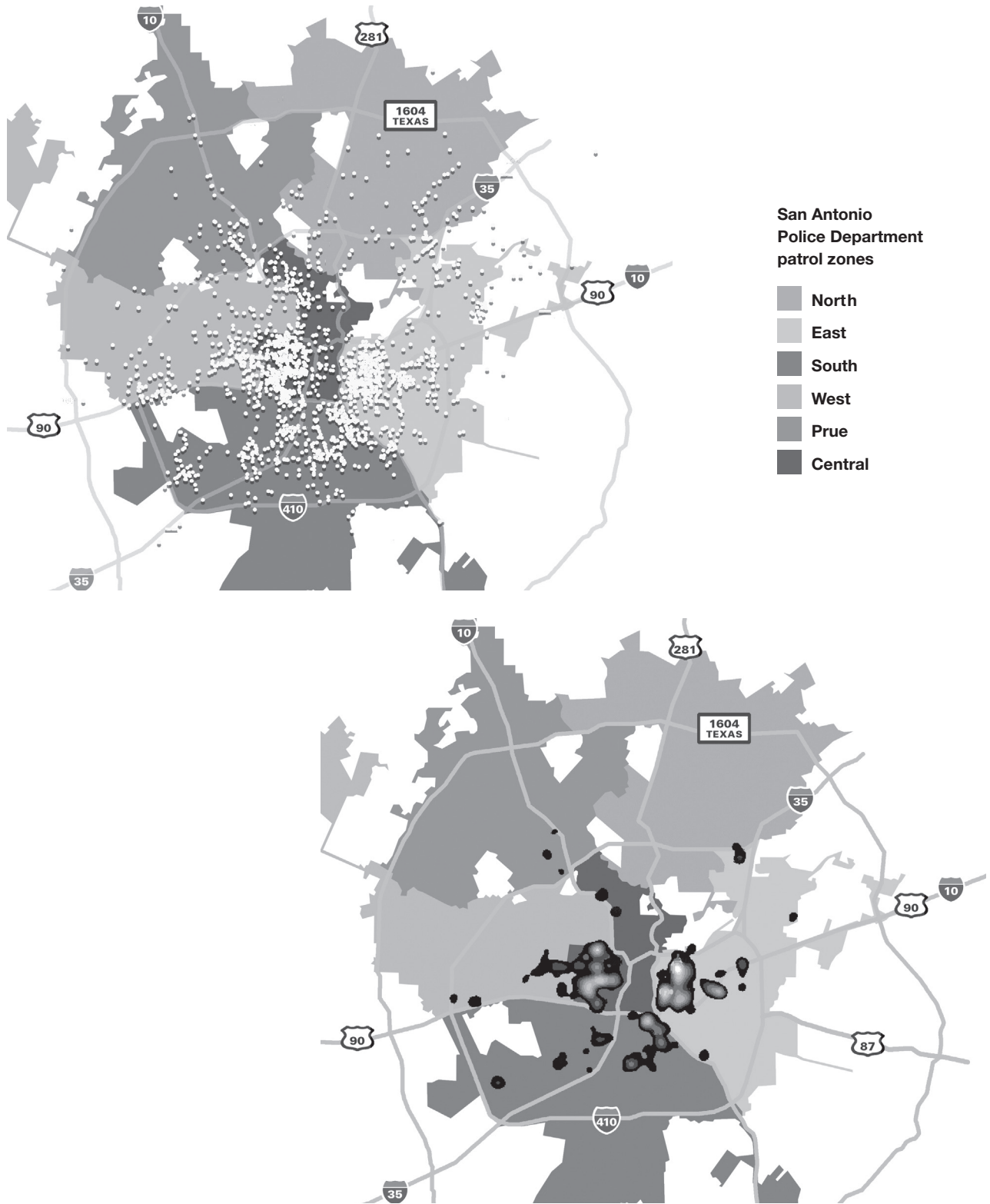
The SAPD enjoys a reputation as one of the nation's leading law enforcement agencies. Its innovative programs, strong connections with the communities it polices, and

effective crime-fighting strategies provide invaluable examples and lessons for other law enforcement agencies. The SAPD's goals are focused on the areas of community policing, decreasing violent crime, and officer wellness.

While San Antonio has a long history of lower levels of violent crime, homicide, aggravated assault, and robbery than other large Texas cities, it still has violent crime rates above the national average. Those rates have increased in recent years, including a significant uptick in 2016, which saw a 59 percent jump in homicides.¹ In response to this increase in violent crime, the SAPD implemented the Violent Crime Task Force in 2017.

1. "San Antonio Police Department: Uniform Crime Reports," accessed February 4, 2019, <https://www.sanantonio.gov/SAPD/Uniform-Crime-Reports>.

Figure 1. Distribution of arrest locations



Pin maps (top) and heat maps (bottom) of arrest locations catalogued by the SAPD Street Crimes Unit demonstrate the span and concentration of SAPD Street Crimes Unit proactivity.

Source: San Antonio Police Department.

Violent Crime Task Force

The SAPD's Violent Crime Task Force (VCTF) is an intelligence-driven initiative designed to reduce crime throughout the city of San Antonio. Before implementing the VCTF, the SAPD had focused on targeting specific high-crime geographic regions. The task force, however, relies on crime intelligence to identify and apprehend known criminals who are responsible for a significant share of the illegal activity that ultimately culminates in violent crimes—violent individuals, or operatives of large criminal enterprises.

The task force uses the San Antonio Fusion Intelligence Center to take information gathered by police officers on the street and turn it into intelligence that can be used to identify suspects. Once individuals are identified, VCTF officers use a variety of tactics to deter criminal activity; these include increasing police presence in the area the suspect is likely to be, working with federal partners, investigations, surveillance, and legal interventions such as court orders. The VCTF also seeks to use every legal avenue, both local and federal, to prosecute these individuals and keep them off the street once apprehended; to this end, the SAPD VCTF strives to primarily make felony arrests.

VCTF partners

The VCTF achieves these goals through a collaborative, multiagency approach. The task force is composed of SAPD covert units, the street crimes unit, SWAT, Fusion Intelligence Center personnel, and representatives from various local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies,

corrections departments, and prosecutors' offices. These participating agencies include the following:

- SAPD
- Bexar County Sheriff's Office
- Bexar County District Attorney
- U.S. Attorney's Office
- Texas Department of Public Safety
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)
- Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA)
- Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF)
- Homeland Security Investigations²

Units made up of officers from these agencies patrol high crime areas. Uniformed officers from the SAPD, the Bexar County Sheriff's Department, and the Texas Department of Public Safety make up the core of the task force.³ While Bexar County has fewer staff to contribute than the SAPD or the Texas Department of Public Safety, it is where the

2. Steve Rickman and Denise Rodriguez, *Safer Neighborhoods through Precision Policing Initiative: San Antonio Police Department Fast Track Report*, IIM-2018-U-017364 (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2019).

3. Jacob Beltran, "Violent Crimes Task Force Arrested 977 people in S.A. in 2017," *My San Antonio*, March 29, 2017, <https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local/article/City-leaders-provide-update-on-approach-to-crime-11034856.php>.



San Antonio police officers at roll call

jail is located; the county deputies' participation aids in cohesive criminal justice collaboration across law enforcement, corrections, and prosecution. Prosecutors are on call 24 hours a day to provide legal support to the VCTF.

Task force partners also contribute intelligence and prosecution assistance. For example, the FBI provides gang intelligence to the task force to enable the identification of prolific offenders.⁴ SAPD intelligence detectives pull and analyze information from uniformed officers and federal partners to determine whom to target in order to most effectively reduce citywide violent crime.⁵ The San Antonio Fusion Intelligence Center has a unique big-picture view, which helps ensure the VCTF is working well with other San Antonio and Texas law enforcement initiatives.

In late 2017, Governor Greg Abbott provided additional resources for the VCTF through the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS). These resources included a Trooper Strike Team of Texas Highway Patrol troopers, Violent

Crime Squads of DPS special agents, a Felony Fugitive Team of Texas Rangers and tactical support personnel, an Intelligence Team of criminal analysts, communication and surveillance support personnel, and an around-the-clock DPS helicopter and crew.⁶ These added resources more than doubled the number of VCTF personnel, aiding investigation and enforcement efforts.

VCTF implementation and coordination

The task force was implemented in two phases:

- **Phase 1** involved building and cultivating the core of uniformed officers, have the most interactions with San Antonio residents and increase the task force's visibility in the community.
- **Phase 2** incorporated investigative components that use the intelligence uniformed officers receive to target and prosecute prolific offenders.

In the early stages of implementation, department heads, high-level representatives, and supervisors of the task force agencies met every two weeks to discuss overall strategy and enforcement efforts. As startup issues were resolved, biweekly meetings became monthly meetings focused on overall strategy and enforcement efforts. These meetings also serve as an opportunity to inform agency representatives of their return on investment and present data on task force activities, including contacts, misdemeanor and felony arrests, drugs seized, and guns recovered.

4. Beltran, "Violent Crimes Task Force" (see note 3).

5. Camille Garcia, "In Response to Violent Crime Uptick, SAPD Unveils Task Force initiative," *The Rivard Report*, January 18, 2017, <https://therivardreport.com/response-violent-crime-uptick-sapd-unveils-task-force-initiative/>.

6. Mariah Medina David Ibanez, and Courtney Friedman, "DPS to Provide More Resources to Help SAPD Fight Violent Crimes," KSAT ABC, October 30, 2017, <https://www.ksat.com/news/gov-abbott-allots-more-resources-to-sa-after-city-sees-double-digit-rise-in-violent-crimes>; Emilie Eaton, "Abbott Boosts State Support for San Antonio Violent Crime Task Force." *My San Antonio*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local/article/Abbott-boosts-state-support-for-San-Antonio-12318632.php>.

VCTF and community-based approaches

In addition to crime-fighting approaches to reducing violent crime, former Mayor Ivy Taylor acknowledges the importance of community-based approaches. The SAPD and the city have a number of community-based initiatives that work in tandem with the VCTF; VCTF partners, such as the FBI, are involved in community outreach.⁷ In addition, the SAPD has made it a priority to be transparent and open with the public about the purpose of the task force, and has trained officers on the importance of taking the time to engage the community. Perhaps because of these efforts, the community response to the VCTF has been positive, reflecting the long-standing strong bonds between San Antonio law enforcement and the communities it serves.

Challenges

In implementing the VCTF, the SAPD has encountered a few challenges. One of the biggest challenges was successfully coordinating a number of different law enforcement agencies with distinct cultures and logistical processes. All law enforcement agencies share a common goal, but they do not approach that goal in the same way. For example, the Highway Patrol was accustomed to working in a very different environment than the dense urban area of San Antonio. To smooth this transition, the SAPD helped Highway Patrol personnel learn the city by putting up maps, teaching the SAPD lingo, providing essential directions and landmarks, and pairing SAPD officers with Highway Patrol officers.

A more technical and very common challenge that arose when first implementing the task force was interoperability of communications. Initially, task force members across various jurisdictions couldn't access the same radio



Examples of San Antonio, TX Police Department social media crime fighting initiatives

channel with a centralized dispatcher, making it difficult to communicate via radio in the field. The SAPD communications manager, with the aid of support from leadership, was eventually able to find a solution by patching all the radios onto one channel.

The SAPD also faced some minor challenges with program management, which it addressed by assigning ambassadors to bring up challenges to leadership. This allowed the department to identify, address, and fix issues. Most challenges were overcome through more internal discussion and, when necessary, modifications in approach.

Successes

The efforts of the VCTF, in conjunction with other departmental initiatives, ultimately led to decreases in crime in the city. From 2016 to 2017, San Antonio saw a reduction of 5 percent in Part 1 crime, including a 16 percent decrease in homicides. From 2017 to 2018, the city saw a reduction of 23 percent in Part 1 crimes; including an 18 percent

7. Beltran, "Violent Crimes Task Force" (see note 3); Garcia, "In Response to Violent Crime Uptick" (see note 5).

reduction in homicides, a 29 percent reduction in robberies, and a 24 percent reduction in property crimes. More details on crime rates in San Antonio are shown in table 1.

The SAPD credits the overall decrease in crime to the efforts of the VCTF, in particular the significant decrease in murders attributed to drug and gang violence.⁸ Homicide clearance rates are also high and arrests are up, especially for felony offenses. According to department officials, as of October 2018, at least 48 percent of arrests were felony arrests, and there had been a 21 percent increase in narcotics arrests since June 2017. The graphs in figure 4 illustrate SAPD VCTF police activities and arrests

throughout 2017. Their successes would not be possible without the partnerships fostered by the VCTF and the combined efforts of all the partners involved.

Moving forward

Since the implementation of the VCTF, the SAPD has experienced a continuing decrease in violent crime on the city’s east side and, as of summer 2018, there were no plans to disband the task force.⁹ The SAPD is committed to continually reassessing the goals and objectives of the task force to ensure that they are addressing violent crime and meeting the needs of the department and the community.

Table 1. Crime in San Antonio 2016–2018

	2016	2017	2018	Percent change 2016 to 2017	Percent change 2017 to 2018	Percent change 2016 to 2018
Homicide	149	125	103	-16%	-18%	-31%
Rape	1,190	1,270	1,278	7%	1%	7%
Robbery	2,232	2,298	1,642	3%	-29%	-26%
Aggravated assault	7,183	7,067	5,890	-2%	-17%	-18%
Total	10,754	10,760	8,913	0%	-17%	-17%
PROPERTY CRIMES						
Burglary	12,235	11,722	8,394	-4%	-28%	-31%
Larceny theft	58,318	55,090	42,233	-6%	-23%	-28%
Vehicle theft	7,233	6,864	5,500	-5%	-20%	-24%
Total	77,786	73,676	56,127	-5%	-24%	-28%
TOTAL UNIFORM CRIME REPORT, PART 1 OFFENSES						
	88,540	84,436	65,040	-5%	-23%	-27%

Source: “San Antonio Police Department: Uniform Crime Reports,” Accessed February 1, 2019, <https://www.sanantonio.gov/SAPD/Uniform-Crime-Reports#30263041-2018>.

8. Rickman and Rodriguez, *Safer Neighborhoods: San Antonio* (see note 2).

9. Dillon Collier, “Cocaine on Consignment, War Over Territory among Challenges Facing Violent Crime Task Force,” KSAT ABC, May 10, 2018, <https://www.ksat.com/news/cocaine-on-consignment-war-over-territory-among-challenges-facing-violent-crime-task-force>.

Figure 2. San Antonio violent crime rate, 2010–2016

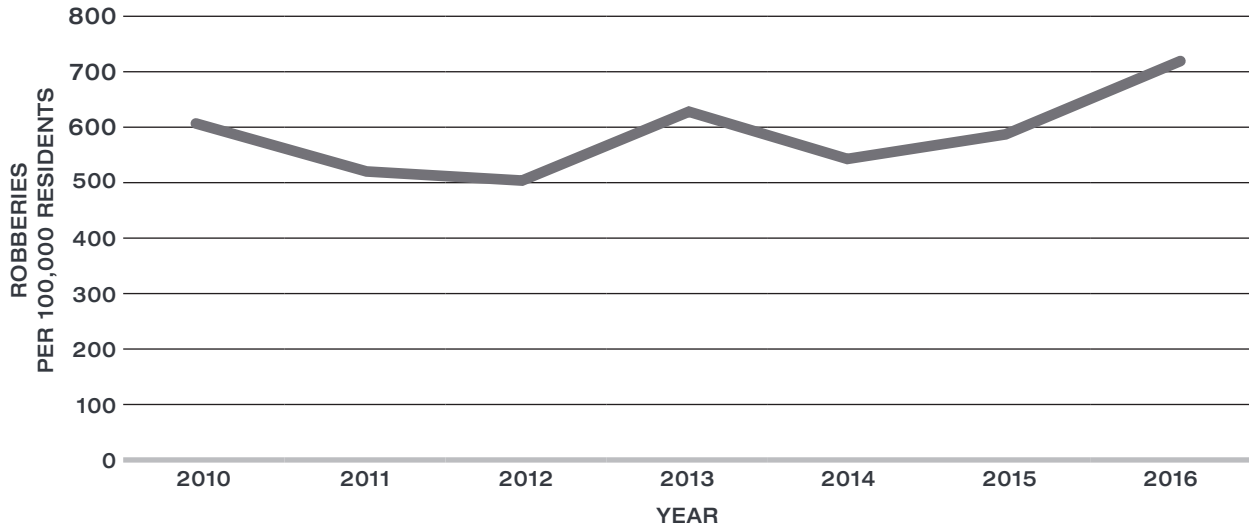


Figure 3. San Antonio crime rate changes 2016–2017

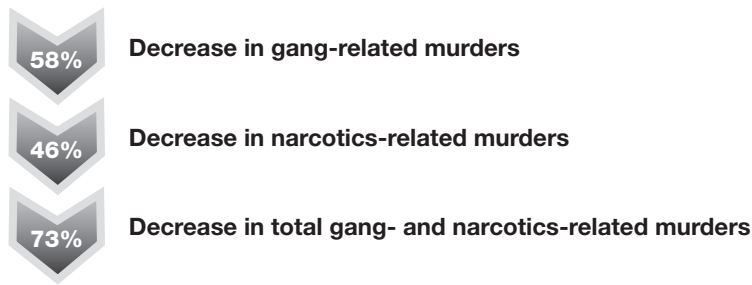


Figure 4. Arrests, felony charges, and warrants issued by the San Antonio Police Department’s Violent Crime Task Force in 2017

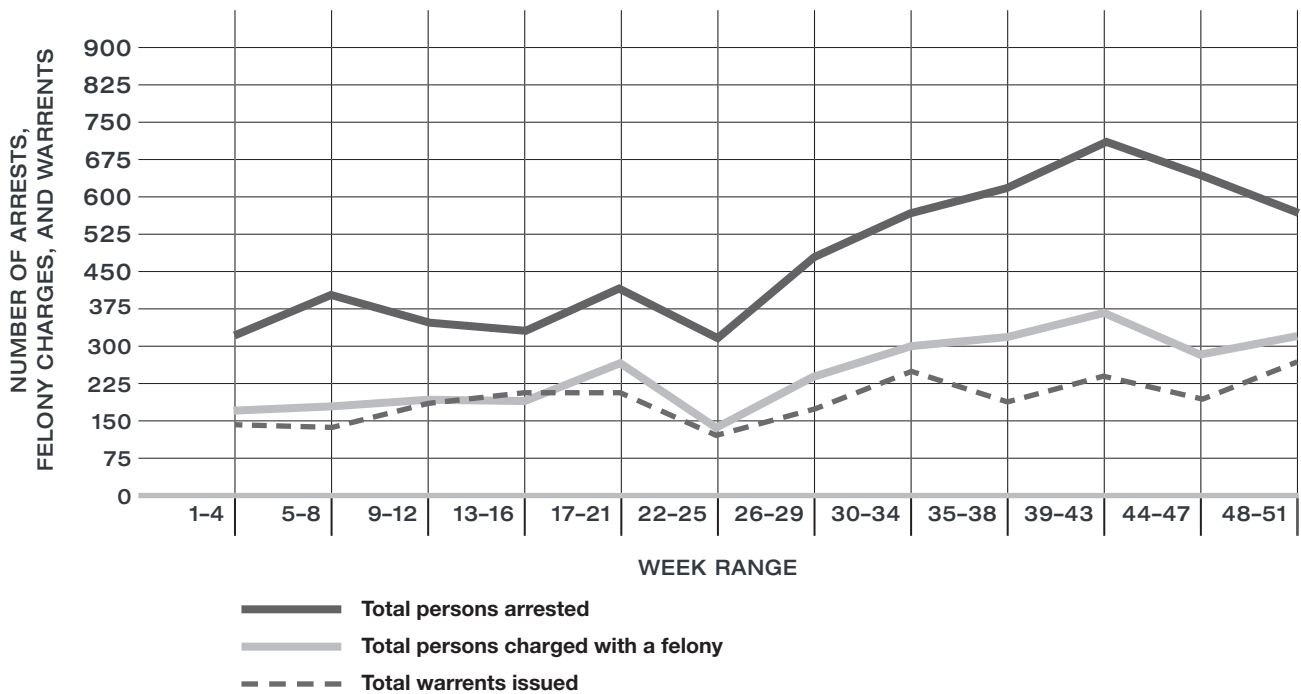
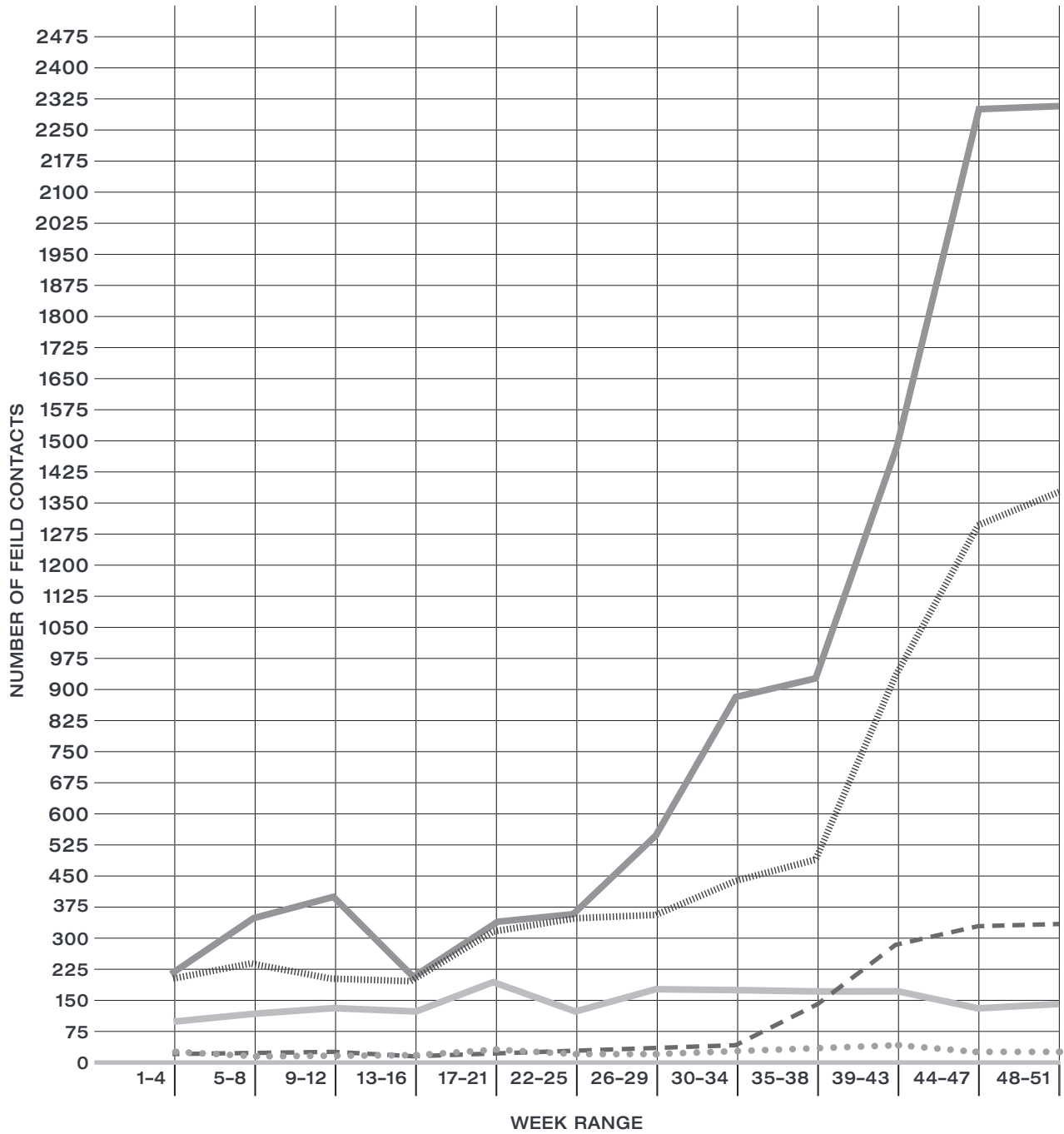


Figure 5. Field contacts by SAPD VCTF in 2017



- Total number of field contacts
- Number of debriefs
- Number of tickets issued
- - - Number of consents to search
- Number of search warrants executed

Lessons for other agencies

The SAPD has learned some valuable lessons on how to design and implement a successful task force to address violent crime and keep the community safe. To develop and implement a successful multi-agency violent crime task force, the SAPD recommends that departments take the following steps:

- **Build a cohesive team of partners that communicate well.** Communication is an integral component of a successful task force. To accomplish it, departments should embrace outside law enforcement partners and have strategies in place to integrate them into the unit. In addition, culture and logistical processes vary across agencies, and departments should be prepared to address these issues to ensure a cohesive team.
- **Facilitate coordination of local, state, and federal prosecution partners.** Strategies should be in place to facilitate coordination among local, state, and federal prosecution partners. Agencies should also strive to involve the prosecutorial team from the beginning to ensure that offenders get off the street and stay off the street; although this was not a significant challenge for the SAPD VCTF, it is a problem that some jurisdictions might encounter. Establishing a common, agreed upon goal can be integral to the success of a program like SAPD's VCTF.
- **Keep task force members apprised of the impact of their work.** Think strategically about keeping task force members motivated once a task force is off the ground and has been running for a while. To do this, the SAPD started tweaking the initiative by including officers throughout the prosecutorial process. This allowed the involved officers to better understand the impact of their work beyond the arrest of an individual.
- **Show appreciation.** The main piece of advice that SAPD has to offer other departments is to be appreciative. While it is important to set expectations, it is most important to ensure that these expectations are reasonable. Above all, The SAPD acknowledges that the VCTF would not be possible without the men and women in the field and the support from the community. Continually expressing this appreciation to those involved in such an initiative is essential to its continued success.

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.

The San Antonio (Texas) Police Department's Violent Crime Task Force is an intelligence-driven crime-reduction partnership focused on the drivers of violent crime. 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; approaches to gun violence; 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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