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On Good Authority is a periodic briefing on trends and issues in criminal justice program evaluation. This report is a summary of research conducted by Gerard F. Ramker, Ph.D., and Robert Bauer, of the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, and David E. Olson, Ph.D., Stephanie Albertson, Jennifer Brees, Andrew Cobb, Lisa Feliciano, and Rebecca Juergens, of Loyola University Chicago. Copies of the report are available from the Authority's Research and Analysis Unit.

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A comparison of local and multi-jurisdictional drug enforcement efforts in Illinois

Multi-jurisdictional drug task forces and metropolitan enforcement groups (MEGs) were formed in the early 1970s to fill the void in drug enforcement efforts between local police departments and federal agencies, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration and Federal Bureau of Investigation. These groups have grown dramatically in number and coverage area since the mid-1980s with federal funds administered by the Authority.

Today, there are 21 multi-jurisdictional drug task forces operating in Illinois. To date, little research has been conducted nationally to assess the degree to which the units target different types of drug law violators.

Through a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance, researchers from the Authority and Loyola University Chicago's Criminal Justice Department developed and tested a methodology for comparing multi-jurisdictional drug unit efforts to those of local police departments. This *On Good Authority* summarizes the findings of this research project.

Throughout this summary, reference to "multi-jurisdictional drug task forces" includes both drug task forces and MEGs.

Methods

To examine in detail the characteristics and case outcomes of multi-jurisdictional drug unit arrestees and compare them to

those drug law violators arrested by local police departments, researchers identified five multi-jurisdictional drug units to serve as the sample. These units included both MEGs and task forces, and served urban and rural jurisdictions. The units provided names, race, gender, date of birth, and other identifiers of individuals they arrested in 1998. With this information, criminal history records (rap sheets) were generated by the Illinois State Police (ISP) and coded to summarize each arrestee's criminal history, characteristics, and outcome of arrest.

Criminal history records for a sample of 1998 drug law arrestees from local police departments within the regions covered by multi-jurisdictional drug task forces also were generated and coded. Arrestees were included from departments that participated in the multi-jurisdictional drug unit through the assignment of officers or other contributions, as well as departments that did not participate.

Through analyses of these data, researchers sought to answer these questions:

1) Are there any differences between multi-jurisdictional drug units and local police departments in the nature of drug arrests made?

2) Are there any differences between multi-jurisdictional drug units and local police departments in the outcomes of the arrests in terms of acceptance for

prosecution, charge reductions, conviction rates, and sentences imposed?

3) Are there any differences between multi-jurisdictional drug units and local police departments in the criminal histories of those arrested?

Results

Nature of arrests

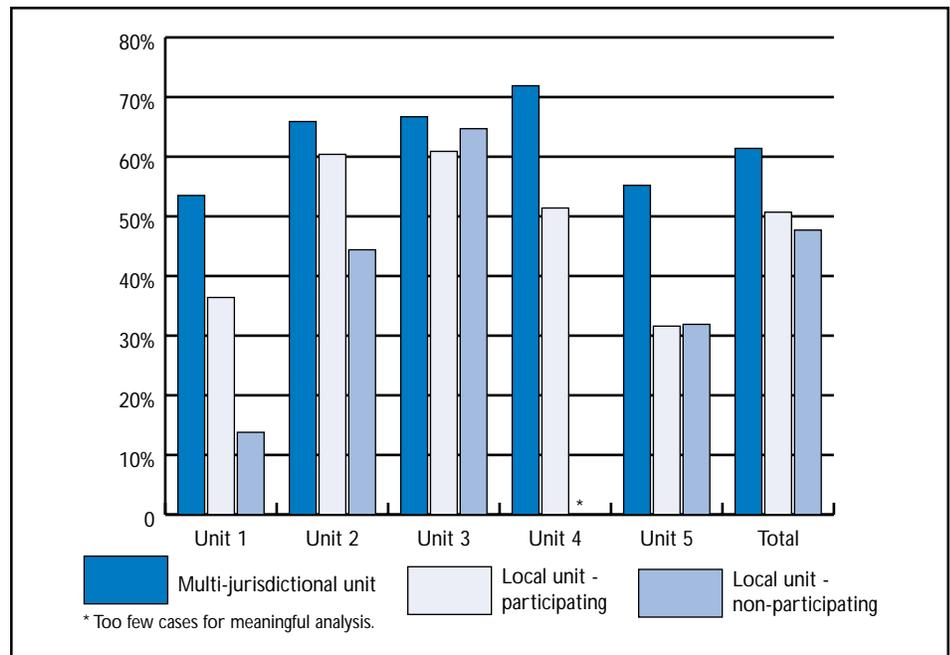
Based on analyses and comparisons of the drug arrests for multi-jurisdictional task forces and local police departments, multi-jurisdictional drug task force arrests were consistently more likely to be for violations of the Illinois Controlled Substances Act, involving cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine. Local department arrests were more likely to be for violations of the Illinois Cannabis Control Act, prohibiting the production, sale and possession of marijuana (Figure 1). However, these disparities varied across units and differed from arrest data submitted by local agencies to ISP's Uniform Crime Report program. For example, according to UCR data, only about one-third of local participating agency drug arrests involved cocaine, heroin, or methamphetamine, and only 15 percent of local non-participating agency drug arrests involved these substances.

Another pattern observed across the units examined was in the nature of arrests made (Figure 2). About 80 percent of multi-jurisdictional task force drug arrests were for drug sale/delivery, as compared to just more than 20 percent of the drug arrests made by participating police departments, and just less than 20 percent for the drug arrests made by non-participating local police departments. As a result, the majority of multi-jurisdictional task force arrests were for felony offenses, and one-half or fewer of the local department arrests were for felony offenses.

Finally, multi-jurisdictional task force arrests were also more likely than local arrests to involve multiple counts or charges. In aggregate, 40 percent of multi-jurisdictional task force arrests involved two or more counts, compared to fewer than 5 percent of the local department drug arrests. This most likely reflects the nature of task force cases,

Figure 1

Percent of drug arrests involving cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine



where numerous undercover purchases may be made from targeted dealers before making an arrest.

Thus, it was determined that multi-jurisdictional drug task forces target a different type of drug law violation than local police departments. MEG and task force group arrests were more likely to involve drugs that are deemed more serious by Illinois law, such as cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, and almost all arrests were for the sale and/or delivery of drugs. By comparison, local police department drug arrests were more likely to involve cannabis and possession offenses with single charges.

Prosecution, conviction, and sentencing

Through examination of each of the arrests and the subsequent information contained on criminal history records, researchers also sought to determine the differences between multi-jurisdictional task force drug arrests and local department drug arrests in the likelihood of prosecutorial filings, charge reductions, and convictions. Because information was missing from a large number of criminal history records examined, conclusions from these analyses were made cautiously.

The vast majority of both local department and task force arrests resulted in the filing of criminal charges. Overall, about 90 percent of both multi-jurisdictional task force drug arrests and drug arrests by local departments resulted in charges being filed by county state's attorneys.

There was no substantive difference between task force and local department cases when reductions in charges were examined. Initial arrest charges were reduced in about 15 percent of all cases filed with the court. However, most local arrests were for drug possession and involved only a single charge, leaving little room for charge reductions. And while multi-jurisdictional cases were more likely to involve sale and/or delivery of illegal drugs with multiple charges, therefore having greater potential for charge reductions, they were not reduced.

When conviction rates were examined, multi-jurisdictional unit cases were more likely to result in a conviction than local department arrests, although the majority of all prosecutions resulted in a conviction. When all multi-jurisdictional units were examined collectively, they achieved a 90 percent conviction rate, compared to just below 80 percent for local participating and non-participating

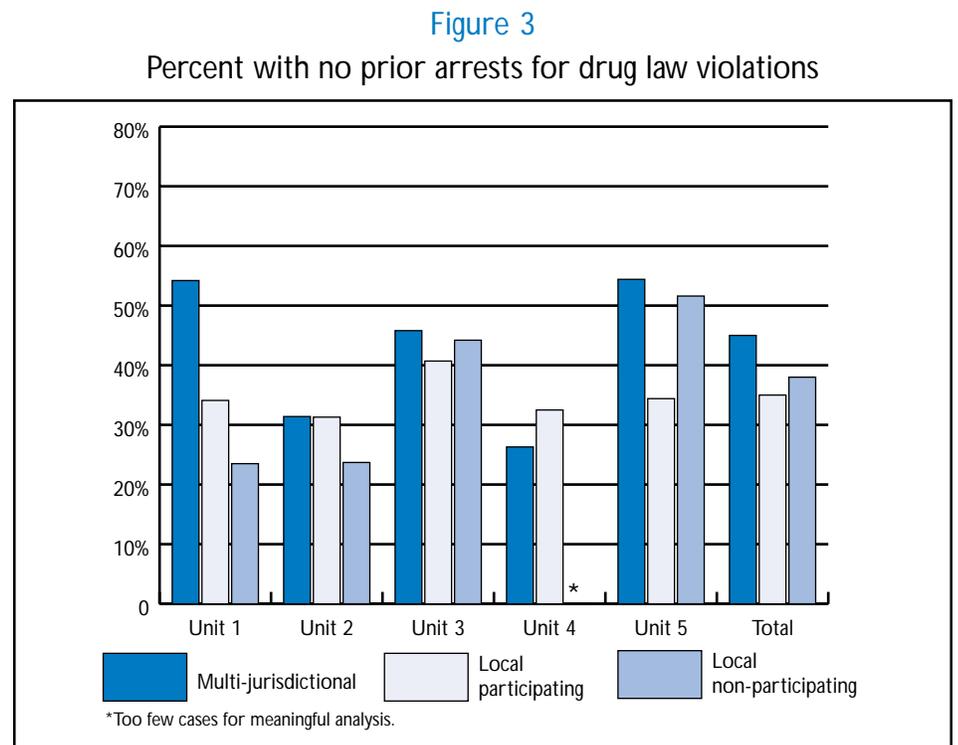
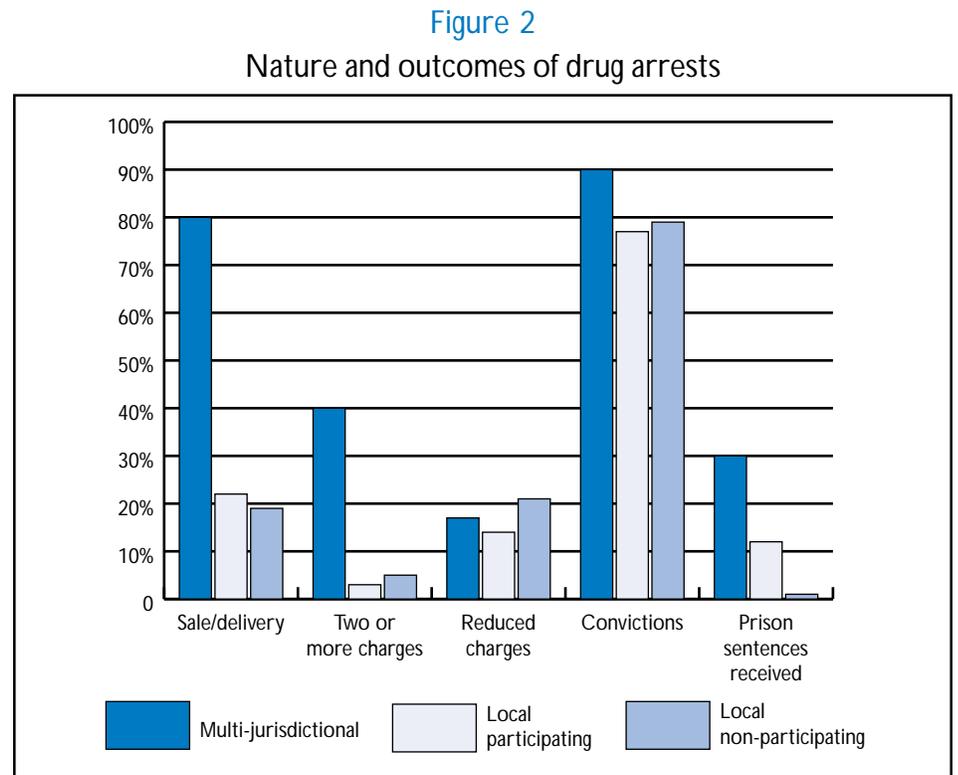
police department cases. This may point to the amount of time, effort, and targeting put into task force cases. Many have suggested that because of the use of hand-to-hand buys, wiretaps, and carefully planned and executed arrests that characterize multi-jurisdictional task force cases, they are more likely to result in convictions, and data appear to support this perspective.

But no difference was noted between task force and participating local department cases in terms of the amount of time elapsed between arrest and final court disposition. On average, sale and delivery cases took 150 days from arrest to disposition in both task force and local participating department cases. The same cases made by local non-participating departments took an average of 200 days from arrest to disposition.

When the sentences imposed on those convicted of the sale and/or delivery of cocaine, heroin, or methamphetamine were compared between task force and local department cases, multi-jurisdictional task force cases were much more likely to result in a prison sentence. One-third of those involved in the sale and/or delivery of drugs identified in the Controlled Substances Act and convicted as a result of a multi-jurisdictional task force arrest were sentenced to prison, compared to less than 15 percent of participating agency cases and less than 5 percent of local non-participating agency cases for the same type of offense. Thus, task force cases accepted for prosecution were more likely to result in a conviction than local department arrests, and were more likely to result in a prison sentence when the most serious offenses were considered.

Extent and nature of arrestee criminal histories

Criminal history records were examined to identify patterns that differentiate task force and local department drug arrestees. In general, individuals arrested by multi-jurisdictional drug task forces tended to have slightly less extensive criminal histories than those arrested by local departments. For example, across all those arrested by the task forces, the average number of prior arrests was 4.5, compared



to an average of six prior arrests among local department arrestees. This pattern was consistent across four of the five units studied.

When prior drug arrests were examined, a number of interesting patterns were found. First, there was relatively little difference between

arrestees when the average number of prior drug arrests was compared. Second, among task force arrestees, the prevalence of prior drug arrests was surprisingly low. Across all multi-jurisdictional units, the average number of prior drug arrests was just more than one. Further, more than 40 percent of the task force

arrestees had *never* before been arrested for a drug law violation. Thus, despite the fact that most task force targets were arrested for felony-level sale/delivery offenses involving cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, they were not formally known, from a criminal justice system perspective, as being involved in drug law violations. However, one-quarter of all multi-jurisdictional unit, participating, and non-participating agency arrestees in the study had been sentenced to prison in Illinois prior to their 1998 drug arrest.

Data notes

This study also identified a number of issues related to the use of criminal history records for data collection. It was noted that in many instances the multi-jurisdictional task force arrests indicated a local police department was the arresting agency on the criminal history record. Subsequent conversations with task force administrators revealed that arrestees are often processed through local police departments, which are then listed on the ISP arrest and fingerprint cards as the

arresting agencies. In other instances, local departments assist task forces in making arrests, particularly when the task forces are serving warrants on multiple offenders simultaneously. This practice varied from unit to unit.

Regardless of the specific circumstances, identifying multi-jurisdictional task force arrests on criminal history records can be difficult. This poses a problem for researchers and criminal justice practitioners who may utilize these records for decision-making purposes.

The research also was hampered by the lack of criminal history record completeness. A significant amount of information regarding prosecutorial decisions and case dispositions was missing from the records. This made drawing conclusions regarding case processes and outcomes somewhat difficult.

Conclusion

This research allowed the Authority an opportunity to develop, test, and refine a

methodology that can be used to better gauge and monitor the activities and impact of multi-jurisdictional drug task forces operating in Illinois.

Findings affirm that multi-jurisdictional drug task forces target more serious drug law violators than local departments, including those committing felony-level sale and delivery offenses involving cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, and those less likely to be known to law enforcement as previously being involved in drug distribution.

Further, the research revealed that the cases presented for prosecution by multi-jurisdictional task forces are slightly more likely to result in conviction, and, despite having more flexibility for charge reduction, were not any more likely than local department arrests to have reduced charges. Finally, multi-jurisdictional unit cases were considerably more likely to result in a prison sentence when compared to similar types of arrests made by local police departments.

