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On Good Authority is a periodic briefing on trends and issues in criminal justice. This report was written by staff senior research analyst Tracy Hahn. It is a summary of a program evaluation of the Violent Crime Task Force in Kankakee County. The evaluation was conducted by Tim Bynum, Ph.D., Scott Decker, Ph.D., and Dan Swift, M.S., of Justice Research Associates. Copies of the evaluation are available from the Authority's Research and Analysis Unit.

The **Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority** is a state agency dedicated to improving the administration of criminal justice in Illinois. The basic functions of the Authority are criminal justice research, federal and state grants administration, and information systems development and support.

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Violent Crime Task Force cracks tough homicide cases in Kankakee County

By the mid-1990s, the homicide rate in Kankakee had risen to more than 80 per 100,000 inhabitants, and ranked among the highest in the state. Compared to a national homicide rate of just more than 8 per 100,000, and a rate in Chicago of about 30 per 100,000, it was evident that homicide and violent crime in Kankakee had reached troubling levels. The rise in violent offenses was attributed to increasing gang activity and drug trafficking — crimes that often are more complex and require detailed investigation and prosecution strategies. The spike in homicide rates and violent crime taxed local law enforcement. Consequently, a large backlog of unsolved homicide cases accumulated, and many residents lost confidence in the police department.

To help alleviate the increasing and unsolved crimes that plagued Kankakee County, the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, through federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act funds, supported the formation and evaluation of a Violent Crime Task Force (VCTF). This *On Good Authority* summarizes the process and impact evaluation of the task force.

Background

The Violent Crime Task Force provided an opportunity to enhance the relationship between the Kankakee Police Department and other law enforcement agencies in the area, including the state's attorney's office, sheriff's department, and other municipal departments. The task force was an integral part of an

overall context of reform within Kankakee-area law enforcement.

VCTF was staffed with three detectives from the Kankakee Police Department and a detective from the Kankakee County Sheriff's Department. In addition, an Illinois State Police detective was assigned to the unit part time. An assistant state's attorney involved in another ADAA-funded project, on violent offender prosecution, also was part of the task force.

The Kankakee County sheriff and chief of police managed the task force through a policy board, which is responsible for the task force's oversight, policy, and direction. The task force was housed separately from the sheriff and city police departments and worked as a unit with all members collaborating on a single case at a time.

The VCTF was formed to investigate unsolved homicides, particularly older cases, and involved the cooperation and commitment of other officers from departments throughout the county. The task force was designed to invest a considerable amount of time and resources into aging, unsolved cases by re-interviewing witnesses and suspects, and pursuing old leads.

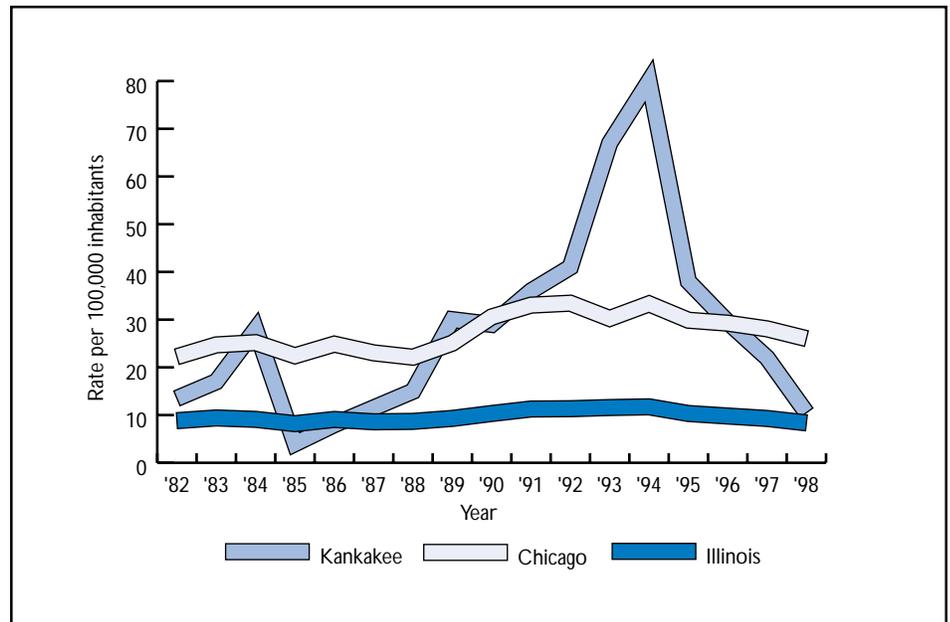
The task force began by studying police records and existing evidence. Detectives then interviewed officers involved in the initial investigation, and contacted witnesses. This process allowed VCTF to determine which cases had the highest potential for resolution.

The evaluation

The evaluation of the VCTF began in late 1996, about one year after the formation of the unit, and concluded in early 1999. The evaluation focused on the implementation and operation of the project, and the impact of the project's activities. The study also provided feedback to foster task force project development. The process component of the evaluation was developed to address the key operating principles of the task force, including increased collaboration, cooperation, and interaction among participating agencies. The differences between task force operations and the standard investigative and prosecutorial practices in effect prior to the implementation of VCTF also were addressed during the evaluation. To make credible assessments of the project's operation, a considerable amount of time was spent interviewing participants and observing project activities. Assessments were made through site visits, documentation collected from activity logs and case studies, and interviews with project and non-project staff.

The impact evaluation was conducted to determine the task force's performance in a number of areas, including those that affect the processing of cases and crime in the community. Several key processing measures focused on the numbers and types of cases handled by the unit, and the amount of time devoted to each case during investigation and prosecution stages. The program was evaluated on the degree to which the project increased the number of arrests, reduced the number of unsolved violent offenses, decreased the backlog of cases, and successfully prosecuted offenses. A tracking system was developed to collect information on cases designated to the task force. This system included data that described the offense, case information related to solvability, dates relevant to case events, and investigator and prosecutor activity. The number of reported offenses in the project area, and interviews to assess community perception on crime and the task force, were used to measure

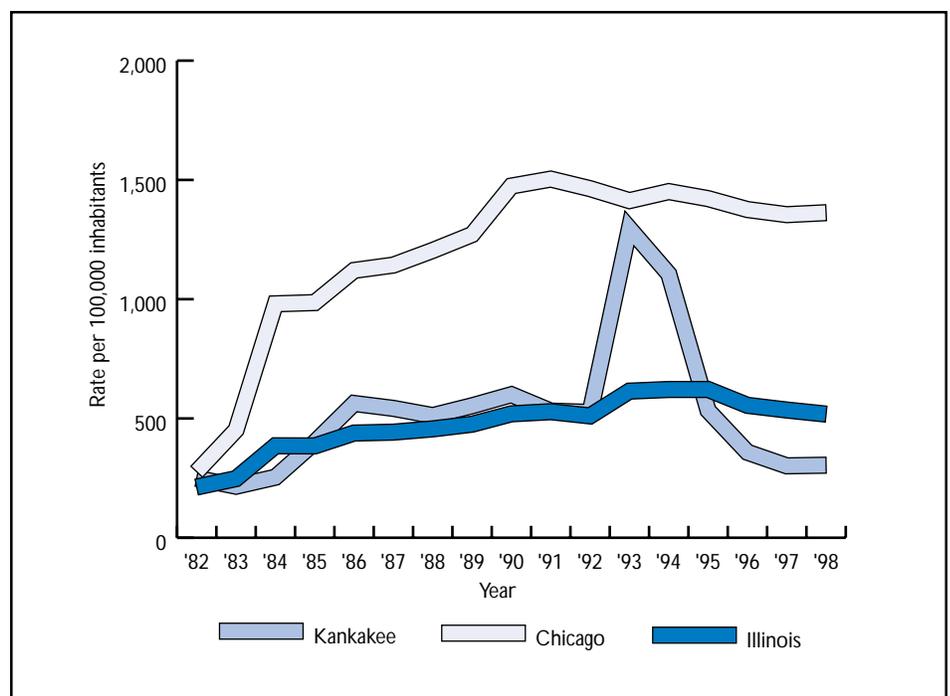
Figure 1
Homicide rates in Illinois, Chicago, and Kankakee, 1982 - 1998



the project's impact. Interviews were conducted with key community leaders, media, and criminal justice personnel in spring 1997 and February and March 1999. Both waves of

interviews included key community leaders, including the Kankakee police chief, Kankakee County sheriff, and the mayor of Kankakee. These individuals were selected based on their knowledge

Figure 2
Aggravated assault rates in Illinois, Chicago, and Kankakee, 1982 - 1998



and activity in the community. The first set of interviews focused on the perception of crime in the Kankakee area, and the second wave emphasized changes in perception since the initiation of the task force. The evaluation team also provided regular feedback to project staff.

Findings

The activities of the task force evolved over time. Initially, investigating older homicide cases that were not solved during initial investigation was the task forces's sole responsibility. The role of the task force gradually changed to assist local police departments with investigations of homicides as they occurred, and the unit was influential in such efforts. More recently, the task force project expanded to include sexual assault cases. The extension into other types of crime investigation lends credibility to the contention that such a unit can be successful in investigating more than one type of serious crime. Occasionally, the task force assisted local police departments outside the city of Kankakee. This helped integrate the unit with the county's law enforcement structure. The practice of working as a team on a single case led to brainstorming, suggestions for new leads, and the benefit of sharing and critiquing strategies. The task force also benefited from the cooperation of a task force attorney who was involved in the early stages of each case. This led to stronger cases.

The community's response to heightened law enforcement efforts toward unsolved violent crimes was an important result of VCTF. Consistent findings emerged from the interviews with Kankakee community leaders, law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and probation officers in Kankakee. There was a shared perception that violent crime had substantially decreased in Kankakee County since 1996 and that the efforts of the task force made a significant contribution to this decrease. Individuals reported a substantial increase in the degree of involvement with the police and the community, and a steady improvement in the quality of

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police services and the level of respect for law enforcement.

The task force strategy of focusing on older, more difficult cases was successful. During the five years prior to the initiation of the project, 97 homicides remained unsolved in Kankakee County. Of these, the task force targeted 38 cases for further investigation. At least one arrest was made in 30 of the cases (79 percent). Convictions were received in 16 cases, and 10 cases were pending a court disposition at the conclusion of the evaluation. Four cases did not result in a conviction or a trial.

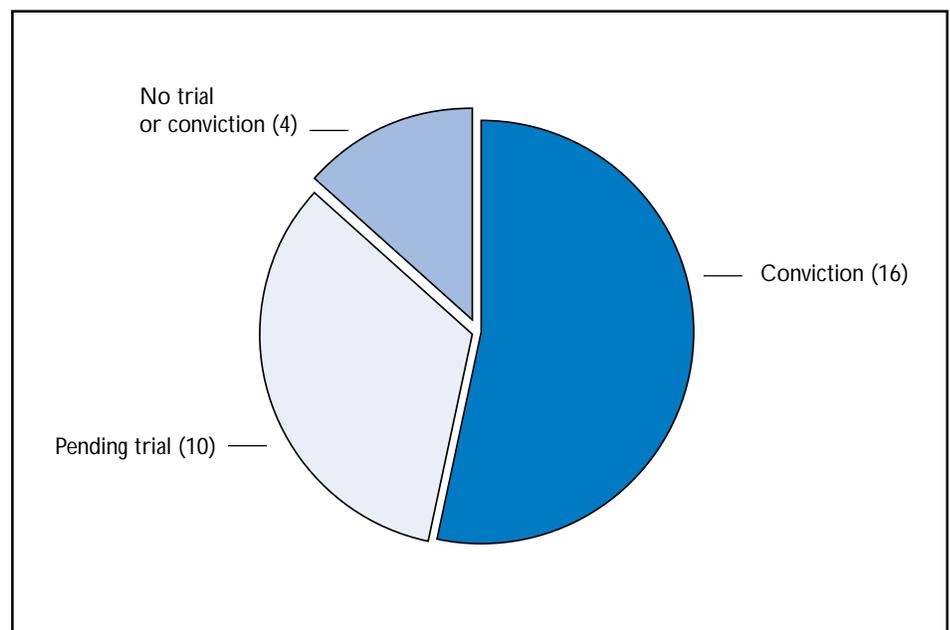
In 30 homicide cases, 34 individuals were arrested. Two individuals were arrested for multiple homicides; each was charged with three murders. By the end of the evaluation, there had been

19 convictions in 21 trials — a conviction rate of 90 percent. Eleven individuals were awaiting trial, and the decision not to prosecute was made in two of the arrests.

Two of the 19 convicted individuals were awaiting sentencing at the end of the evaluation. Most of the other 17 defendants (94 percent) received prison sentences of 10 years or more.

The evaluation examined the event characteristics of homicides and assaults that occurred from 1990 to 1997, including gang, alcohol, and drug involvement. While homicides were more likely to involve drugs, the analysis found that both offense types shared more commonalities than differences. An analysis of victim characteristics also found that homicide and assault victims

Figure 3
Outcomes of 30 cases with arrest



resemble each other in terms of age, race, and sex. The pattern of victim/offender relationships for the two crimes also was similar. These results indicate that assault and homicide have a large number of common characteristics, and the efforts to reduce one offense type also may reduce the other.

Conclusion

The dramatic increase in homicide rates observed in Kankakee prompted a response from law enforcement officials that was unprecedented. Assigning officers to old homicide cases was an important statement to the community about the significance of such crimes to the police department. The project also led to an increased willingness in the community to provide information that helped solve new homicides cases and other serious offenses. The subsequent

drop in homicide rates, while consistent with the pattern of decline in homicide in the nation, was much greater than the national trend.

VCTF played an important role in strengthening the relationship between the community and police, and may be considered paramount in the effort to bring about change in Kankakee. The task force also introduced routine communication across agency boundaries, and the policy board established a forum for structured communication among agencies.

The size of the community, the unusually high homicide rate, the climate of reform, strong leadership, and a commitment to community involvement contributed to the formation and success of VCTF in Kankakee. The evaluation found the following elements to be most

critical to the success of a task force of this kind:

- Sufficient time to devote to targeted cases without distraction from other daily administrative tasks and routine cases;
- A commitment by participating agencies to foster communication and cooperation among task force members, as well as area law enforcement and the community; and
- Involvement of a dedicated prosecutor early in the investigation process to assist in case development and produce successful prosecutions.♦

