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CRIME-FIGHTING ON A BUDGET

When money's tight can we afford specialized units?

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. In many areas the prolonged downtrend in crime and violence has come to an end. At this writing [Pittsburgh](#) is well on its way to posting its worst murder record in a decade, with the number of homicides already equaling all of 2007. In [Chicago](#), a city stunned by the recent brutal murders of actress Jennifer Hudson's mother, brother and nephew, murder's gone up nearly fifteen percent. As for the nation's great crime-reduction success story, [New York City](#), its murder rate (430 killings so far in 2008) is nine percent *higher* than at this time last year. Even the celebrated home of [Operation Ceasefire](#) is under siege; although Boston's murder rate is slightly lower than in 2007, its [proportion of victims](#) under eighteen (67 so far in 2008) remains *three times* that of five years ago.

What can police do? There are three approaches to reducing crime and violence: uniformed patrol, selective enforcement, and a community model.

- Adding patrol officers seems the simplest solution. Unfortunately, budgets are tight and cities across the country are actually losing officers. [New York's force](#), the country's largest, has dropped to levels of the early nineties. Due to their limited tax bases smaller cities have been particularly hard hit. By the end of 2008 [Vallejo](#) (Calif.), population 120,000, will have lost *sixty officers* from its once-robust complement of 150. At the opposite end of the U.S. [Pontiac](#) (Mich.), a city of 66,000, is making do with only 65 cops, a ratio of .98 officers per 1,000 population, less than half the national average of 2.4. As one might expect, crime [has gone through the roof](#).

Just how important is patrol? Many years ago an experiment in Kansas City "proved" that random patrol had no effect on crime. The study [has since been severely criticized](#) because actual differences between beats -- some were left alone, in others random patrol was eliminated, and in others it was increased -- were far too small to expect a difference. Moreover neither citizens nor crooks had been informed of what was going on.

- Can cops be used more effectively? That's the promise of selective enforcement. Problem areas can be flooded with uniformed officers to augment regular patrol and help tamp down crime. Teams of plainclothes and uniformed officers can be assigned to watch drug-dealing hot spots and stop and frisk

gang members. [Gun-carrying felons can be targeted](#) with Federal prosecution. Such strategies are credited with steep reductions in homicide in [Baltimore](#). Hoping for similar results, [Chicago](#) is assembling a 150-officer task force to go after armed gangsters.

But not everyone's sold. For the last nine months a gang squad and roving teams of officers have made hundreds of drug arrests and seized numerous guns in selected areas of [Cleveland](#). Crime's reportedly dropped like a rock. Yet the police union president claimed that the improvement isn't due to proactive enforcement but to random fluctuations in crime -- "the luck of the draw." Some citizens are also skeptical. As the co-chair of a Cleveland group noted, pulling officers from patrol -- what was done to staff specialized teams -- can leave some neighborhoods floundering. That's why [Boston's](#) police commissioner recently disbanded an eighty-officer surveillance task force and put them back in uniform. "Clearly in Boston the amount of visibility in the street is a great concern to the community, and we want to make sure we increase that."

- Some claim that cops alone can't make the difference. Boston's [Operation Ceasefire](#) is probably the best-known example of a community-wide response to gang violence. Troublemakers were brought in for face-to-face confrontations with police and probation officers, who promised to arrest them at the slightest misstep. ATF was called in to stop gun trafficking, the DEA to dismantle drug operations. But it wasn't all enforcement. Social agencies and church and community groups were very much a part of the effort, steering gang members to jobs, training and substance abuse treatment.

For several years results seemed spectacular, with reductions in homicide of as much as 61 percent. By 2000, though, the gang problem had come back and violence was up. What happened? Participants admitted that after an initial success the program [lost steam](#), its complex structure proving exceedingly difficult to maintain over the long haul. A 2007 attempt to implement Ceasefire in [Cincinnati](#) stalled relatively quickly, apparently for much the same reason. Meanwhile hopes are high for a new Ceasefire program in [Pittsburgh](#).

Policing is at heart a crude tool, a way to apply force to achieve desirable social ends. Beyond putting cops on the street and locking up offenders we don't really know what works. In any case, as crime goes up and citizens feel less secure, strategies that reduce already sketchy beat coverage, in effect robbing Peter to pay Paul, may not be the best approach. It may not be sexy, but helping traditional patrol

and detectives become more efficient and effective by studying and adjusting how they work and deploy seems by far the most promising approach.