



Cross-Jurisdictional Task Forces on the Border: Targeting Drugs and Violence in San Diego County

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CROSS-JURISDICTIONAL TASK FORCES ON THE BORDER: TARGETING DRUGS AND VIOLENCE IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, San Diego County¹ had a total of 20 cross-jurisdictional task forces with the goal of targeting drug trafficking and violence that stemmed from the U.S.-

For the purpose of this project, a task force was defined as any cooperative law enforcement effort involving two or more criminal justice agencies with jurisdiction over two or more areas, sharing the common goal of impacting one or more aspects of drug control and violent crime problems.

Mexico border. The current project, which was funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ)², was conducted to better understand how these task forces operated, their short- and long-term benefits, and where opportunities for improvement may exist. Because much of the research on task forces is dated, relies on

limited data sources, and is not generalizable (due to the multiple functions and permutations that task forces can take), this report is useful to law enforcement both in San Diego County, as well as other jurisdictions across the country interested in better understanding task forces targeting drug-related crime and violence that involve local, state, and federal partners.

This CJ Bulletin summarizes the top ten lessons learned from this three-year research project. For more detailed information regarding the research protocol, prior literature, methods, and research findings, please contact SANDAG at (619) 699-1900.

LESSON 1:

COLLABORATION IS IMPORTANT AND A TASK FORCE OFFERS A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SO

Criminal activity, especially as related to drugs and violence, often crosses jurisdictional boundaries and studies of strategies targeting these issues have shown that efforts involving inter-agency partnerships and collaboration are more effective than one agency operating in isolation. That is, when law enforcement does not collaborate in terms of investigations and prosecution, it works to the advantage of organized crime groups because individual agencies acting alone may lack the expertise and resources, as well as the legal authority, required to make a unified response. In addition, activities may be uncoordinated, duplicated, and incomplete, and the safety risk to undercover officers may significantly increase.

"The task force is...great for deconfliction...if you don't have that then you have an 'us' versus 'them' aspect..."

- Federal task force focus group participant

While formal partnerships between federal and local agencies make intuitive sense, the current degree to which federal agencies collaborate with local partners to tackle urban crime only became more common in the 1980s. Multi-jurisdictional task forces are one of the most common ways that agencies can work together to target a complex problem because the partnership is typically more formal and the goals are clearly outlined.

¹ As part of this study, collaborative efforts in Imperial County, which neighbors San Diego County to the east, were also examined through task force and stakeholder surveys. Detailed information from this component of the study is available in the full report which is available from SANDAG upon request.

² Opinions or points of view expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

LESSON 2:

TASK FORCES ARE BENEFICIAL TO BOTH LOCAL AND FEDERAL AGENCIES IN THE SHORT- AND LONG-TERM

To better understand the benefits of task force participation, the input of task force leaders and sworn law enforcement (who had served on task forces and who had not) was collected through surveys and focus groups. As Table 1 shows, the benefits of task force participation can be described as benefits to locals, the feds, and to public safety both in general.

For locals, benefits include involvement in cases they may not normally be involved in, assets that may come back to their department, and training and experience their officers receive. As one local task force focus group participant explained, “We don’t have the number of people to run a unit or have an impact...we get a huge benefit in terms of the resources, knowledge, and experience available.” Benefits for federal agencies include access to locals who may have more thorough knowledge of the community, access to confidential informants, and access to uniformed staff when it is needed on an operation. One federal source described, “If you are conducting a drug case with a detective, they are going to tell what neighborhoods are dangerous, what gang runs in the neighborhood, what houses are being watched.”

Table 1
BENEFITS OF TASK FORCE PARTICIPATION

To Local Agencies	To Federal Agencies	To Both
Involvement in higher level cases; more resources, training; experience; access to seized assets	Knowledge of the community; access to confidential informants; access to uniformed staff	Better deconfliction; force multiplier; not limited by jurisdictional boundaries; build stronger cases

Finally, other benefits to both locals and feds include improved information sharing that results in better deconfliction (the process of avoiding interference when suspects are the target of multiple investigations), being a force multiplier of resources (when agencies leverage manpower logistical support, equipment and other resources), and having the ability to build stronger cases when not limited by jurisdictional boundaries.

LESSON 3:

SAN DIEGO COUNTY COLLABORATES WELL

In 2011, at the beginning of this project, there were 18 task forces in San Diego County that had a primary mission addressing issues regarding cross-border drug-related violence; and by 2013, this number had increased to 20. These task forces could be considered well-established, with an average of 14 years in existence, and an average of 26 full-time sworn staff from nine different agencies. Over half of the task forces included at least one federal (100%), local (89%) and state agency representative (50%), as well as a prosecutor (78%) and someone from a community supervision agency (50%). These statistics demonstrate the high level of collaboration in San Diego County that is not always the case in other areas.

The impetus for this project was two local departments (Chula Vista Police Department and San Diego County Sheriff’s Department) receiving federal funding to supplement FBI-led task forces or start a cross-jurisdictional effort to target cross-border drug-related violence.

When law enforcement stakeholders were asked to specifically rate the level of communication and collaboration between different entities in the region, over half described each of these partnerships as relationships that operated “very well” or “well” in general, with collaboration between local agencies receiving the highest ratings, and those between federal agencies receiving the lowest (Figure 1).

Figure 1

LAW ENFORCEMENT STAKEHOLDERS' RATINGS OF COMMUNICATION/COLLABORATION

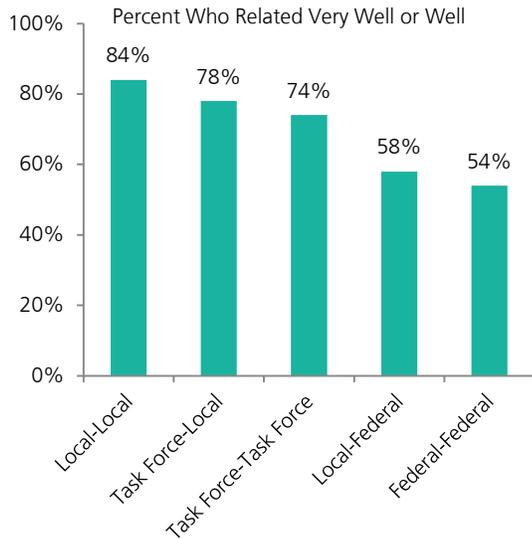
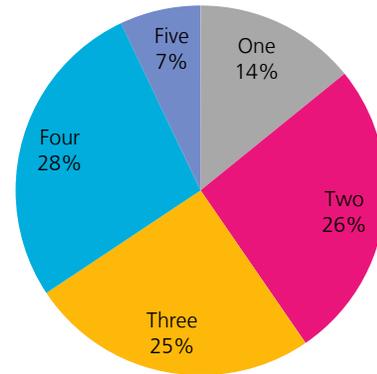


Figure 2

TASK FORCE TARGETS HAVE PRIOR CONTACT WITH MULTIPLE LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES



LESSON 4:

TASK FORCES TARGET DIFFERENT TYPES OF OFFENDERS THAN LOCAL AGENCIES IN MOST CASES

To determine if task forces target more serious offenders and how many resources had been required to address the criminal behavior of task force targets, law enforcement contacts between individuals arrested as part of a joint task force takedown on January 25, 2012, were documented. As the following figures show, these 110 individuals had a considerable amount of prior contact with local law enforcement agencies (total of 2,456 contacts, which equates to approximately 22 per target). In addition, for most (86%) of these individuals, this contact occurred with multiple agencies (Figure 2) and for multiple reasons (Figure 3). Violent charges included robbery and homicide, property included burglary and motor vehicle theft, and "other" included not complying with court orders, weapons-related offenses, and resisting arrest. In addition, most of the targets who came into contact with local law enforcement did so in jurisdictions other than the one where they were currently documented as living, demonstrating the importance of collaboration and information sharing and how criminal enterprises do not limit their activities only to where they live or one jurisdiction (Figure 4).

Figure 3

TASK FORCE TARGETS HAVE PRIOR ARRESTS FOR A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT OFFENSES

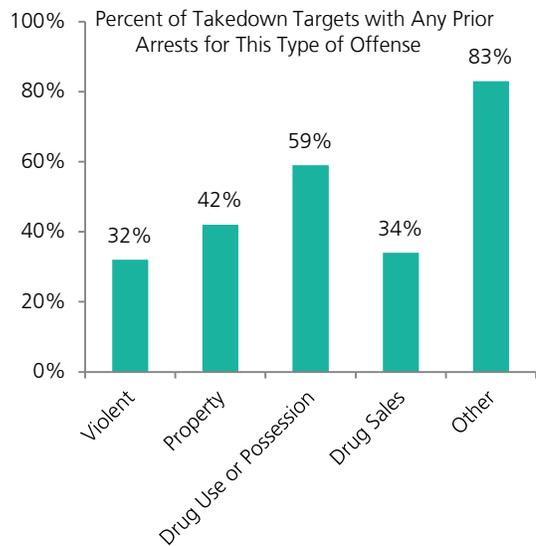
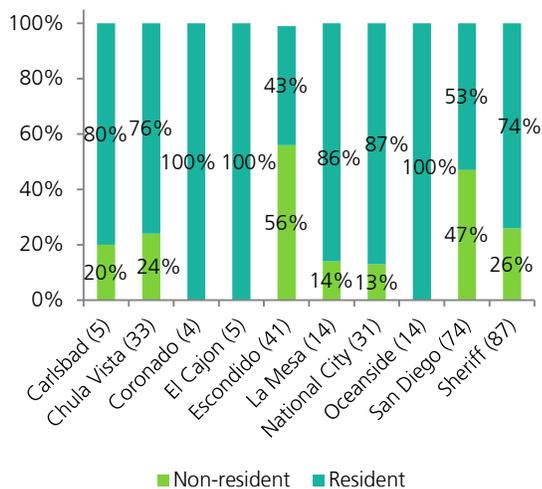


Figure 4
MOST LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES HAVE CONTACT WITH TARGETS WHO DO NOT LIVE IN THEIR JURISDICTION



LESSON 5:
TASK FORCES MAY BE EVEN MORE IMPORTANT IN A BORDER ENVIRONMENT

Because the U.S.-Mexico border remains the primary gateway for moving illicit drugs into the U.S., and the amount and severity of violence related to the drug trade has increased in Mexico, the use of task forces in border regions appears to be a valuable tool to facilitate coordination and information/resource sharing.

85% of survey respondents reported that border communities present unique challenges for task forces, including an increase flight risk, perceived lack of collaboration with law enforcement in other countries, a greater number of agencies to coordinate with, and dynamic drug trafficking organizations who try to stay one step ahead.

Almost all (96%) of the law enforcement stakeholders surveyed for this project (over 800 from local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies in San Diego County) felt that there should be greater task force participation by local agencies and 99 percent agreed that task forces are even more important in a border region. When asked why they thought this situation was the case, common responses included the greater variety

and amount of crime in these areas, the fact that the region is an international point of entry, the greater number of agencies required to coordinate, and the potential for spillover violence.

When asked to describe the greatest threat to combating cross-border drug-related crime and violence in the next five years, the most common responses included limited resources to deal with dynamic criminal enterprises, collaborating with law enforcement in other countries where there may not be trust, ongoing challenges with maintaining effective collaboration and communication, and the continued demand for illegal drugs in the U.S.

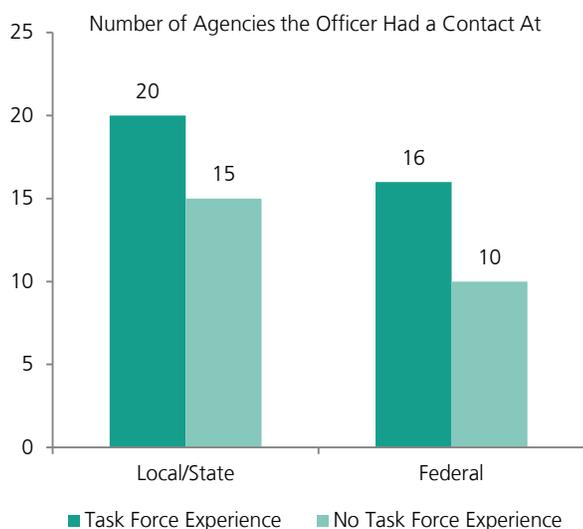
- San Diego County Task Forces**
- ◆ Anti-Money Laundering
 - ◆ Border Corruption
 - ◆ Border Crime Suppression Team
 - ◆ Border Enforcement Security Team
 - ◆ Computer & Technology Crime High Tech Response Team
 - ◆ Cross-Border Violence
 - ◆ East County Regional Gang
 - ◆ High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas Sheriff's Team
 - ◆ Internet Crimes Against Children
 - ◆ Jurisdictions Unified for Drug & Gang Enforcement North and South
 - ◆ Major Mexican Traffickers
 - ◆ Marine
 - ◆ North County Regional Gang
 - ◆ Regional Auto Theft
 - ◆ San Diego County Narcotics
 - ◆ San Diego Fugitive
 - ◆ San Diego Tunnel
 - ◆ Violent Crime Gang Group

LESSON 6:
TASK FORCE ASSIGNMENT PROVIDES NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO DUPLICATE

To determine if long-term connections are truly formed after participating on a task force with contacts at other agencies, stakeholders surveyed (those who had served on a task force and those who had not) were asked if they could comfortably contact at least one individual at each of the 30 local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies in San Diego County. As Figure 5 shows, for local and state law enforcement partners, those who

served on a task force had contacts at 20 agencies, which was significantly higher than the 15 for those who had not served on a task force. Similarly, federal agents who had served on a task force felt they could contact an average of 16 agencies, compared to 10 for those who had not served on a task force. In addition, these individuals with connections through task forces utilize the contacts their contacts have, creating a network that is able to more effectively respond to drug-related crime and violence that crosses the border and jurisdictional boundaries.

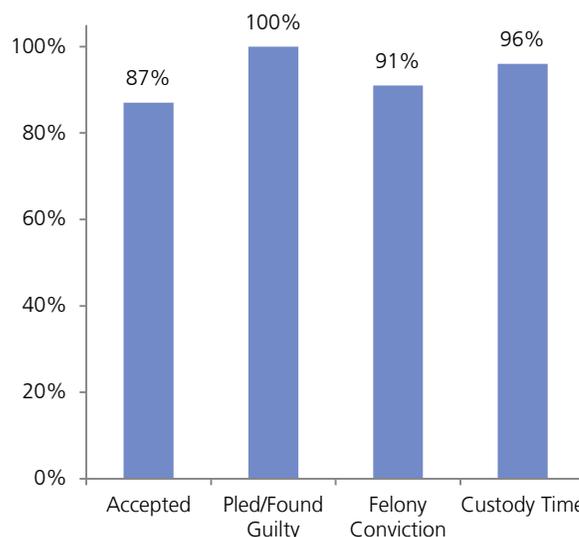
Figure 5
OFFICERS WITH TASK FORCE EXPERIENCE HAVE CONTACTS AT MORE AGENCIES THAN THOSE WITHOUT



LESSON 7:
TASK FORCE CASES ARE OFTEN SUCCESSFULLY PROSECUTED

With the general belief that strong cases for prosecution can result from agencies collaborating on a task force, case outcomes were compiled for four collaborative efforts. As Figure 6 shows, which highlights data from one of these efforts (the Violent Crime Task Force-Gang Group), it did appear that law enforcement had worked well together and with the prosecution to submit cases that were successfully prosecuted, as demonstrated by the high acceptance rate (85% federal, 2% state) and high percentage who pled or were found guilty (100%) and who were sentenced to serve time in custody (96%).

Figure 6
FEDERAL/LOCAL TASK FORCE CASES TRACKED FOR THE PROJECT WERE SUCCESSFULLY PROSECUTED



LESSON 8:
COLLABORATION IS NOT EASY

While the vast majority of law enforcement stakeholders see the value of working collaboratively in a task force environment, a number of challenges that were described could be summarized as focusing on the following:

- Different agency cultures and bureaucracy at the federal level;
- Perceived overlap of targets;
- Interoperability challenges;
- Lack of commitment to participate by some agencies;
- Time required to do background checks; and
- Mandatory rotations.

When asked to describe how task forces could be improved, suggestions included having regular meetings with task forces and partnering agencies, doing more outreach to encourage agency participation, having more formal liaisons between the task forces and host agencies, beginning background checks before an officer is formally assigned, improving radio communication interoperability, and having standardized procedures for selecting, supervising, and transitioning officers assigned to the task force.

LESSON 9:

AFTER ACTION PLANS ARE IMPORTANT IF SUSTAINED CHANGE IS DESIRED

Because violence in an area may actually increase in the aftermath of a large takedown, as rival gangs position themselves for greater influence, it is essential that efforts are part of a larger comprehensive strategy, have clear goals, and include an after action plan to reduce the possibility that crime is merely displaced.

To determine if crime, as measured by call for service (CFS) data to police, decreased in a community following a task force arrest, analyses were conducted comparing the amount and pattern of data in the 90 days prior to a large scale takedown and the 90 days after. While there was no significant change overall, analyses revealed that CFS increased in areas that had higher household incomes and a greater proportion of non-White residents, which possibly could reflect a greater willingness to reach out to police in the aftermath of an arrest.

LESSON 10:

IT IS CHALLENGING TO MEASURE A TASK FORCE'S EFFECTIVENESS

While it is important from both a cost-effectiveness and procedural standpoint to document how well task forces are operated, a number of nuances regarding the challenges of doing so are worth highlighting. These include the following:

- One arrest by a task force is not necessarily "equal" to an arrest by a solo agency because the task forces target higher level offenders. Therefore, efforts to compare task force statistics with those of an individual department should not be made.
- Because task force operations can be very lengthy, it can be a challenge to accurately define a period of "inputs" and "outputs" to measure cost-efficiency. For example, during the period of intensive information gathering, there may be considerable costs, but arrests and seizures do not occur until a much later point in time.
- Different task forces may have slightly different goals, limiting the ability to compare outcomes from one to another. In addition, some outcomes may be a by-product of an investigation (e.g., drugs seized), but not the primary goal that should be used to measure effectiveness.

Because over half of the task forces surveyed said they compiled statistics on the number of arrests, seizures (cash, drugs, guns), and prosecutions, it would be helpful if different task forces coordinated as much as possible to ensure these measures were compiled in a standardized way so that successes could be documented and shared to a greater degree than they currently are.

IMPLICATIONS

As a result of this research, a number of policy implications were offered for stakeholders in San Diego County and other jurisdictions to consider. These tie into the top 10 lessons described here and include the following:

- Build a strong foundation of collaboration that will support task force involvement, regardless of the current fiscal situation.
- Implement regular meetings and investigate other methods to ensure ongoing communication is not purely case driven.
- Incorporate best practices (including utilizing a problem-solving approach and targeting the most prolific offenders) into task force activities to the greatest degree possible.
- More effectively communicate task force successes to document their worth and encourage collaboration.
- Create more opportunities for informal task force participation if formal opportunities are cost-prohibitive.
- Examine ways to standardize local officer assignment to a task force.
- Ensure adequate interoperability between task force officers.
- Investigate how reliably after action plans are implemented and determine how best to ensure efforts have more than short-term displacement benefits.
- Ensure that all criminal justice system components are able to support the activities of a task force, including detention facilities and prosecutors.