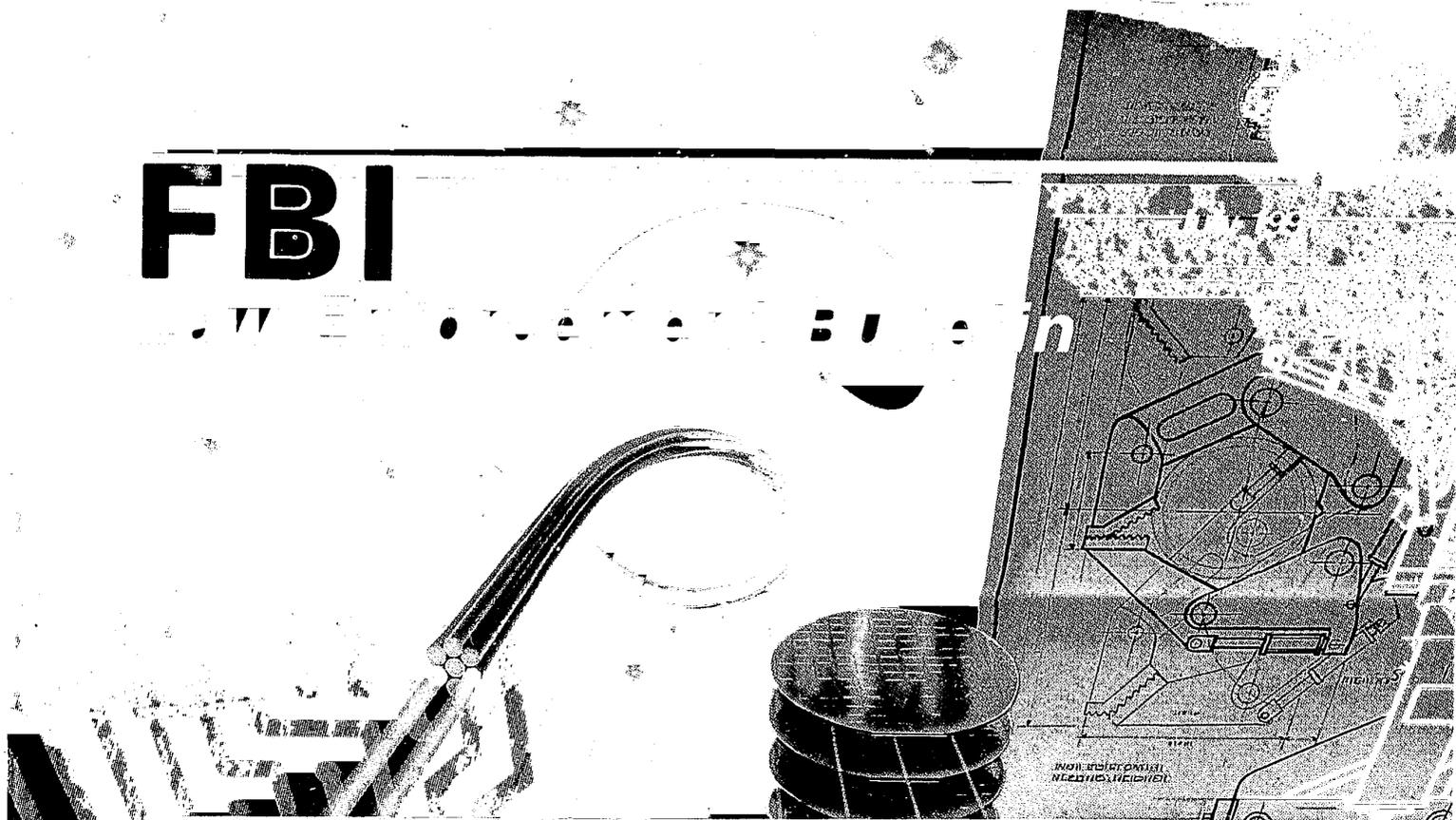


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William S. Sessions, Director

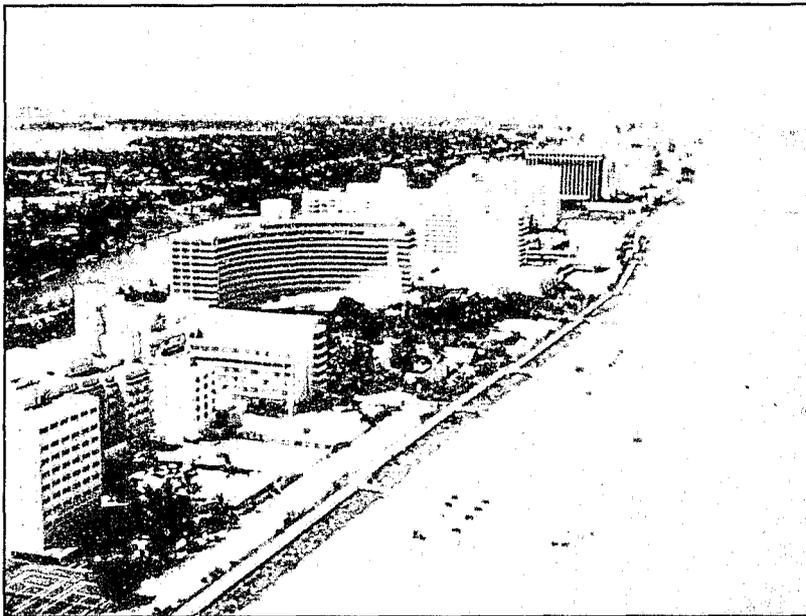
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Police Practices



Operation STAR

Miami, Florida, attracts a significant number of tourists each year. The climate of the city acts as a magnet to those wanting to escape to a place known for its balmy weather, sunshine, surf, and sand. In turn, these tourists have to offer what every U.S. city needs—money. Without these tourist dollars, Miami's economy suffers considerably. Therefore, the city must remain attractive to vacationers. One way to ensure this is to reduce the number of crimes committed against tourists.

To protect visitors from the city's criminal element, the Miami

Police Department instituted Operation STAR (Safeguarding Tourists Against Robberies). The department took this action when it began to notice an upswing in robberies involving tourists.

The Problem

Increasingly, vacationers and business travelers were becoming the prey of criminals. Those committing crimes would target people driving rental vehicles, knowing that the occupants always carried money, cameras, or other valuables. Also, since these victims were from out of town, they usually were reluctant to return to

be witnesses for the prosecution, and the criminals realized this.

Criminals developed innovative approaches to their victims. One method was to bump the rear of the victims' vehicle with their own. The victims, believing they were involved in a minor accident, would exit their vehicle to assess the damage. When they did this, the criminals, using force or at gunpoint, would rob the victims of money, jewelry, and sometimes even the rented car.

Another effective method was to pull alongside vehicles and gesture or yell to the passengers that something was wrong. When the occupants stopped to investigate, they would fall victim to the robbery. Or, the criminals would simply drive through areas of the city looking for people trying to read a map. They would then approach the vehicle, as if they were going to offer assistance. In most cases, however, they would just open the door, drag the victims from the vehicle, and commit the robbery.

The Solution

The department realized that it must take a proactive approach to this problem. One idea that surfaced was to conduct decoy operations within areas of the city that attracted large tourist populations. This decoy operation was given the name "Operation STAR."

To begin, two Operation STAR teams were formed. Each consisted of a sergeant and seven

officers, one of whom was female. It was decided to use a female decoy officer to increase the appearance of vulnerability.

The decoy would stop her rented vehicle in one of the targeted areas and raise the hood to make it appear as a disabled vehicle. Or, she would stop to use a pay phone and act as if she was calling to get directions. At all times, the other officers, riding in an undercover vehicle, kept the decoy under surveillance, including the use of a video camera. A video tape showing what transpired during the robberies was especially useful for prosecution.

Good Samaritans

Oftentimes, people from the area offered to assist the female decoy officer. On one occasion, a vehicle with three occupants drove past the decoy vehicle and noticed the lone female. They circled the block and parked their vehicle nearby. One suspect stayed in the car with the engine running, while the other two approached the decoy officer. As they began to walk toward the decoy, a tow truck operator stopped to help the would-be victim and refused to leave, even though the decoy did not want his help. Seeing this, the two suspects then walked back to the car and departed the area.

Use of the Media

The department decided to conduct a media blitz of Operation STAR to deter criminal activity. News personnel from a local tele-

vision station were invited to ride with the STAR teams and video tape what transpired. Because of

“

...the police department is working to make ...visits to Miami enjoyable by ensuring that they are crime-free.

”

the wide publicity, criminals became wary of tourists, not knowing if they were really visitors or the decoy team in action.

Additional Resources

The Operation STAR teams enlisted the help of the department's Career Criminal Detail to monitor suspects as they were processed through the criminal justice system. Some of the offenders had several previous

arrests, mostly for robbery. This fact resulted in many remaining in custody with increased bonds and facing longer sentences upon conviction.

Conclusion

Operation STAR continues to shine in Miami. During the initial operation, the city realized a 12-percent reduction in robberies. In fact, August and September 1990, the first 2 months of Operation STAR, showed the lowest number of robberies reported for any month during the entire fiscal year.

Because of the success of Operation STAR, the department formed a new detail that will work only decoy operations, although using different scenarios. Hopefully, tourists will realize that the police department is working to make their visits to Miami enjoyable by ensuring that they are crime-free.

LEB

Commander M. Frank Shonberger, Crime Scene Investigation Unit, and Sgt. Bradford Swink, Supervisor of the Robbery Detail, Miami, Florida, Police Department, provided the information for this column.

Police Practices serves as an information source for unique or noteworthy methods, techniques, or operations of law enforcement agencies. Submissions should be no more than 750 words (3 pages, double spaced and typed) and should be directed to Kathy Sulewski, Managing Editor, *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Room 7262, 10th & Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20535.
