

Report

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THE TUSCALOOSA COUNTY HOMICIDE UNIT

by

Steve Mastrofski
Center for Urban and Regional Studies
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, NC

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Department of Political Science
Indiana University
Morgan Hall 121
Bloomington, Indiana 47401

THE TUSCALOOSA COUNTY HOMICIDE UNIT

Law enforcement agencies in Tuscaloosa County, AL, have pooled their resources for professional in-depth investigations of all major crimes against persons in the county. The Tuscaloosa County Homicide Unit, an operationally independent squad, has exclusive jurisdiction in the county for all investigations of homicide, serious assault, rape, attempted rape, suicide, and certain instances of manslaughter. The Homicide Unit is manned entirely by personnel provided by law enforcement agencies operating in the county. Nonetheless, Homicide Unit officers serve under a director who has full and independent operational control over their activity. Criminal justice administrators in the county report that this rather unique arrangement has worked well for them and believe it might serve as a model for other communities developing coordinated law enforcement programs.

Tuscaloosa County is representative of many of the smaller metropolitan areas in the United States. Most of the county's land area is unincorporated. Sixty-five percent of its 116,000 population live in its three incorporated municipalities, of which Tuscaloosa, with 65,000 persons, is the largest. There are three local law enforcement agencies -- the Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Department, the Tuscaloosa City Police Department, and the Northport Police Department. In addition, five state law enforcement agencies -- the Alabama Department of Public Safety, the Enforcement Division of the Alabama Beverage Control Board, the Law Enforcement Section of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the University of Alabama campus police, and the Bryce and Partlow Hospital security police -- operate within the county. The Western Alabama Narcotics Squad, a 10-county regional agency, also operates out of Tuscaloosa and receives its personnel from state and local police agencies. Its operating expenses, however, are funded primarily by Law Enforcement Assistance Agency grants distributed through the Alabama Law Enforcement Planning Agency.

Early in 1973, after experience with the Western Alabama Narcotics Squad had shown that high levels of professional investigation could be achieved by a specialized task force composed of municipal, county, and state law enforcement agents working together full-time under unified command, the idea for the Homicide Unit was born. District Attorney Louis H. Lackey asked the county grand jury to consider creation of a special squad to handle major felonies. After reviewing past investigations and consulting local law enforcement officials, the grand jury decided that the quality of investigations regarding crimes against persons could be improved by developing a specialized squad.

Designing the Unit

Tuscaloosa City Police Commissioner Delaine Mountain, Chief of Police W. M.

Marble, and Sheriff Beasor B. Walker worked closely with Lackey in developing a multi-agency approach for organizing the Homicide Unit. Their goal was to increase the quality of homicide investigations throughout Tuscaloosa County without significantly increasing costs to taxpayers. Consequently, no budget allocations were sought. Rather, the Unit was to be manned by personnel already employed by local law enforcement agencies. Equipment would be provided from existing stocks maintained by each agency. The planners hoped to increase law enforcement productivity by using a small group of experienced, highly-trained investigators. The squad members, the planners believed, would develop highly specialized skills by working on all of the cases in a very limited sector of criminal activity. These major violent crimes were few in number relative to other crime categories, but their importance to the public safety seemed unquestionable. The administrators felt that economies might be achieved by consolidation and specialization of a small proportion of the community's public resources. Resource contribution to the agency depended entirely upon the voluntary decision of each participating agency head. No written contracts or special legal recognition were involved in forming the agency. Thus, the Unit took form -- not out of legislative mandate or ratification -- but out of inter-agency cooperation as an administrative means of improving the quality of public service.

How It Works

Chief Deputy Warren J. Miller of the Sheriff's department was assigned full-time to direct the unit. Major crime task forces in other communities were studied. The director and other criminal justice officials observed the operation of squads in Gainesville, Atlanta, and New Orleans. Insights provided by these agencies led officials in Tuscaloosa County to give the Unit's director equal status with the heads of other law enforcement agencies in the area. Thus, the director has the authority to consult directly with any law enforcement agency head in the area or any other relevant government official.

On November 25, 1973, the Homicide Unit was officially formed, personnel were assigned, and operations commenced. At that time four employees were assigned to the Unit: two detectives from the Sheriff's department and two from the Tuscaloosa Police Department. All detectives were commissioned by the Sheriff, who also provided office space. Both contributing agencies provided automobiles and other equipment for their respective men. Since its inception, the Unit has grown with its workload. The City of Tuscaloosa now provides four detectives (including the director) and one secretary; the county provides three detectives (including the director) and one secretary; Northport provides one detective. The Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Bureau of the U.S. Treasury Department has now one man assigned full-time to conduct background checks on firearms.

Although the Unit operates independently from its contributing agencies, much of its work involves close cooperation and coordination with all criminal justice agencies in the county. In addition to using the facilities, equipment, and records of the contributing agencies, the Unit works closely with the District Attorney, the County Coroner, and two physicians who conduct rape examinations. The Alabama Department of Toxicology and Investigation

performs all chemical and narcotics analyses.

Even though the Homicide Unit has no separate legal identity, the public as well as state and local agencies quickly began referring relevant cases to the Unit. Other law enforcement agencies are requested only to secure the scene so that evidence is not destroyed. In addition to receiving reports directly from the public and other law enforcement agencies, the Unit also reviews reports of all deaths in the county to determine whether or not an investigation is warranted in each case.

Thoroughness Stressed

Once the agency determines that it has jurisdiction, one or more detectives are assigned to the case. A highly trained evidence technician is dispatched to the crime scene to gather evidence. Extensive background investigations of both suspects and victims are conducted. Director Miller places great stress upon thorough case reporting. He estimates that one-third of his detectives' time is spent on writing up cases. Because the Unit's members are not burdened with investigating the more frequent but less severe misdemeanor and felony crimes, they can spend the time to ensure that their investigations are complete and thorough.

The District Attorney's office reports that the Unit has indeed achieved high standards in the quality of evidence obtained, in the thoroughness of reports filed, and in adherence to Constitutional procedural requirements. The Unit has also been commended by the local bar association in this respect. Of all cases forwarded recommending prosecution, only two have not resulted in conviction. One of these cases came in the first week of the Unit's existence.

Reasons for Success

Miller gives four reasons for his agency's success. The first is the cooperation and respect received from all agencies in Tuscaloosa County. The existence of the Homicide Unit, he says, reduces the potential for inter-departmental rivalry in highly-publicized cases. The Unit provides a monthly report of its activities to all contributing agencies to keep them abreast of its total activity.

The second reason is the quality of personnel recruited. Motivation and proven capability through experience are foremost criteria for selection to the Unit. The director makes his selections based upon a thorough, first-hand knowledge of each applicant's background and abilities. This is one administrative advantage that agencies in the smaller metropolitan communities can exploit. Personnel turnover is low. Since the Unit's inception, only three people have transferred.

The third reason given for the Unit's performance record is the agency's insistence upon professional standards -- especially with regard to training. All sworn personnel receive 80 hours of forensic training. Newly-assigned detectives receive specialized evidence training at various academies located throughout the state. The Unit's evidence technician has had two years

experience with the FBI fingerprint section and has been given an additional 10 weeks of training since he joined the unit. The District Attorney keeps the Unit up-to-date on the legal aspects of search and seizure procedures. All detectives have gained great expertise on investigations of homicides and other violent crimes by virtue of their exclusive specialization in this area.

The fourth reason provided by the director is the continual, ongoing nature of the Unit as an operating entity. By working together daily, the detectives develop -- in addition to professional expertise -- a familiarity with standard operating procedures and a thorough awareness of each other's capabilities.

Problems and the Future

There have also been accompanying problems. Strangely enough, these problems have been generated, at least in part, as a consequence of the agency's success. The Unit's performance level reflects an ever-increasing workload. This workload has necessitated the augmentation of additional manpower, even though the jurisdiction has remained the same.

Now, however, some have suggested that the Unit's success justifies expanding its geographic and/or criminal jurisdiction. The Unit has from time to time on request aided in departments in other counties. The District Attorney in a neighboring judicial district was so impressed with their performance that he has requested that the Unit's jurisdiction be expanded to include Fayette, Lamar, and Pickens Counties, all of which have very small law enforcement agencies. This poses potential problems in terms of arrest powers. But a more difficult potential problem is the perceived preemption of local law enforcement prerogatives by the Unit. In Tuscaloosa, the problem was avoided by having the major local producers of police services provide personnel to the Unit. But it seems unlikely that the local agencies in the other counties could afford to contribute personnel to the agency on a full-time basis, due to their small budgets.

Expansion of the Unit's criminal jurisdiction is an issue approached with somewhat greater skepticism. Local agencies have frequently urged the Unit to assume responsibility for investigating some property-related offenses because of the local agencies' workload and the expertise of the Unit's investigators. While the Unit has tried to accommodate when possible (especially when connected with offenses falling under its jurisdiction), many criminal justice administrators feel that the Unit's effectiveness would be diluted if its jurisdiction were expanded. Miller feels that the workload would inevitably increase disproportionately to the availability of manpower. Investigative expertise would also be reduced because the Unit's time would be devoted to a broader range of criminal offenses. For manpower to keep pace with the workload, local agencies would have to contribute a greater share of their own forces, which would reduce the flexibility of their agencies' investigative operations. The recent development of a specialized robbery unit by the Tuscaloosa Police Department seems to reflect a continued trend toward specialized investigative units in this metropolitan area.

Possibly the biggest problem for the Unit has been the inflexible nature of its operating budget. In the past it has relied entirely upon contributing agencies for operating support. While this has presented no problem regarding salaries, it has meant that equipment shortages do sometimes occur. Although contributing agencies are as generous as possible, they do not often maintain the special equipment required by the Unit's investigators, and even when they do, additional problems of coordinating its use arise. This is perhaps a consequence of the original design of the agency. But if demands on the Unit increase enough, some expenditure autonomy for the agency might be justified, especially if, on a trial basis, it proves cost-effective. The Unit has attempted to increase its material flexibility by seeking external funding from the Alabama Law Enforcement Planning Agency. It recently received for the first time a \$10,000 grant to purchase equipment. The director hopes that he will be successful in procuring future equipment grants by obtaining status as a pilot project for LEAA.

Some Suggestions for Others

The Unit has operated approximately 1 1/2 years. As a consequence of his experience with the Unit, Miller has several recommendations for any community considering the development of a similar inter-agency unit. First, he suggests that considerable effort be expended in studying the operation of such units in several different communities. Problems vary from community to community, and it is important to incorporate these features of a program which will respond to a community's needs.

Second, it is possible for a special unit to be overwhelmed if it assumes too heavy a workload through a broad jurisdictional scope. By starting small, the squad may use trial-and-error adjustment until the most satisfactory procedures are developed. The agency may then gradually expand, if necessary, to keep pace with its workload. The Tuscaloosa Unit expects to add another member from the Alabama Department of Public Safety as soon as the Department can provide a man. The Unit will also move soon to new, separate quarters to accommodate the gradual growth.

The third suggestion is to make the new squad's operations as independent as possible from already-existing agencies. This reduces the potential for interdepartmental conflict over administrative and operational matters.

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Inquiries regarding the Tuscaloosa Homicide Unit may be directed to Chief Deputy Warren J. Miller, Director, Tuscaloosa Homicide Unit, 1616 26th Avenue, Tuscaloosa, AL 35401.

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