## Law enforcement agencies, community members convene to solve Oakland gang problems

By Ali Winston / KALW on Tuesday, Aug 24, 3:51pm



Photo courtesy of Ali Winston.

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Oakland is a city of hills and waterfront, plenty of sunshine and mild weather as well as a vibrant cultural and political history. Yet for all that, Oakland is often best known for its crime problem. Just ask Rickey Henderson. A T-shirt featuring baseball's stolen-base king bears his quote: "Everything I know about stealing, I learned in Oakland."

What police here are more concerned about isn't stealing, but the city's violent crime. The city of 400,000 consistently averages over 100 murders annually. And the <u>Oakland Police Department</u> claims most of the city's violent crimes come from street gangs.

ANTHONY BATTS: What we're trying to do here is we're doing something that's called hot-spot policing. We're using technology to identify down to the block, down to the house on a block, where crime is being committed.

Oakland Police Chief Anthony Batts is currently hosting a two-day <u>summit</u> of federal, state and local law enforcement agencies as well as social service providers to talk about gang crime.

BATTS: And so we don't go out as an occupying army to impact every resident in the city of Oakland, every minority child in the city of Oakland. We focus on that 1% of the community that is doing the most violent act, and we're going after them and holding them accountable

KALW's Ali Winston reports on how Oakland's dealing with its local gangs.

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ALI WINSTON: If you ask the Oakland Police Department, they'll tell you guys are an equal opportunity employer.

JEFF ISRAEL: We have Hispanic gangs, we have African-American gangs, and we have Asian Gangs, we have white gangs. They're pretty much the entire color of the rainbow – we've got it.

Deputy Chief Jeff Israel with the Oakland Police Department says the city's been handling them better since voters passed Measure Y six years ago.

ISRAEL: Violent crime is down in this city. I believe it's a direct result of a lot of the Measure Y services that have been provided that otherwise may not be there.

Measure Y paid for a range of city programs aimed at steering at-risk youth and young adults away from violence through education, employment or other methods. It also changed how police dealt with suspected gang members: they tell them what they are being investigated for and what will happen if they don't change their ways.

ISRAEL: We tell them, "You're on our radar." I mean, years ago we didn't tell you if you were under investigation. We're calling you in and we're having the FBI and the U.S. attorney tell you, "You're on our radar. Stop it. And by the way, here's another way to go."

But Measure Y hasn't eliminated Oakland's gang problem. The city's murder rate is still high for a city of its size.

So when Police Chief Batts arrived in January this year, he decided to get some more help. One of the first things he did was call <u>Joe Russoniello</u>. Russoniello was the U.S. Attorney for Northern California until two weeks ago and has spent a lot of time dealing with street gangs.

RUSSONIELLO: The whole focus now is on evidence-based enforcement. Being smarter in law enforcement. We started with an analysis. We have the best people that we have from the state, from the police department, give us a backgrounder, a primer on what organizations there were out there, how they were established and so on.

The result was two gang sweeps: Operation Knockout in April and Operation Tapout in June, both aimed at the Norteño gang and NuestraFamilia, a prison-based gang that calls most of the shots for Norteños around California.

RUSSONIELLO: We treat these gangs, by the way, much like the military treats insurgents in Iraq or Afghanistan. And in fact, in Salinas, we had the benefit of being able to use some of the technologies from the <a href="Naval Postgraduate School">Naval Postgraduate School</a> that had actually been developed on the battlefield for gathering intelligence, being able to identify people who associated. Using that same technology in a domestic environment works very well.

Sixty-four people were arrested during the operations. And as a result, police claim violence is down: shootings down 50% from last year, murders down 80%.

Oakland's Chief Batts was so impressed with the results, he decided to replicate it. And this week, he's getting started.

A two-day summit began today. It will feature meetings with community members to discuss intervention measures. And law enforcement meetings will also meet to share information and develop a plan of attack.

At this stage, Deputy Police Chief Israel says federal agencies like the <u>FBI</u> and the <u>Drug Enforcement Administration</u> can help Oakland conduct expensive, time-consuming investigations that will target violent gangs and their sources of income.

ISRAEL: If we could get the feds to come in and all help us with these targeted gangs and we could do it all at once, then I think just like Salinas, there's going to be a huge impact. You take off a hundred of your most violent offenders all at once, that's gonna have a huge impact.

And the people that you didn't arrest? Hopefully they're going to look at that and say, those guys are gone for many, many years in a federal penitentiary and I've got all these services being offered to me, maybe I'm not doing this as smartly as I could. That's the end game we're looking for.

Although many of Oakland's elected officials have bought into the plan, community members aren't sure that more policing, more arrests, and more prison time are the answer.

TONY MARKS-BLOCK: What other choices do people have but to support their families?

Tony Marks-Block is an organizer with the <u>Stop the Injunction Coalition</u>. That's the controversial <u>North Oakland gang injunction</u> that took effect earlier this year. Marks-Block says Oakland's gangs exist because the black market is the only economy some residents have access to.

MARKS-BLOCK: Oftentimes, it is those commodities, the drug commodities, that can actually control. And that is where the violence comes in, because in order to maintain control over any market, there is always going to be violence. You can see that in oil markets or in any sort of natural resource.

Marks-Block says locking people in prison only locks them into a life of crime.

MARKS-BLOCK: When you get out of prison, of course with a felony conviction, you do not have many job opportunities. So to include a stick measure, like rounding up supposed gang members ... one, you're going to get people who aren't necessarily gang members but who fit a description into the system. And second, those who are active in organized underground economy activities, they are going to be in that economy for the rest of their lives, because it's the only option for them once they get out, if they do ever get out of prison.

So instead of bolstering enforcement efforts, Marks-Block would prefer seeing money spent on job training, education and small business development – things that will support the entire community, rather than turning them against the authorities.

RUSSONIELLO: I think you're right to say in the past, there has been antipathy between the police and the community. There's been a certain level of cynicism on the part of the community towards the police, but they're their best friends, they're going to find and the police are the difference between being victimized on a regular basis and feeling some sense of security.

Both Oakland's Police Department and the U.S. Attorney believe they can replicate the success of the Salinas program in Oakland. Although crime has dipped in the Central Valley city since the gang sweeps earlier this year, it is too early to tell whether the calm will hold.

The one thing Oaklanders can be sure of, says former U.S. Attorney Russoniello, is that this gang crackdown will be anything but brief.

RUSSONIELLO: This is not the Seventh Calvary going in there for two or three days, showing the flag and then leaving town. We're in this for the long haul.