

# promising approaches to addressing crime

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March 2002

## **Police-Probation Partnerships: Boston's Operation Night Light**

*By Kent Reichert*

### **The Challenge**

Among the tools available in the corrections basket, probation is at once the most used and, arguably, the most vilified. Stakeholders across the spectrum, from offenders to the general public, and even many practitioners, commonly perceive probation as toothless and ineffective. Nevertheless, more than 3.8 million people are currently on probation in this country, nearly twice the number of people behind bars.<sup>1</sup> For this reason alone, making probation work is a critical public safety issue, one with profound cost, policy and justice implications.

### **Highlighting Innovation**

In Boston, an innovative program for juvenile offenders that teams police and probation officers - working together under distinctly different mandates - has attracted national attention. The program, called Operation Night Light, has been credited with helping to dramatically reduce the rate of juvenile homicides, improve the rate of probation compliance, and increase public safety in the city. A natural, if spontaneous, outgrowth of the community policing movement, Operation Night Light is at the forefront of a growing national trend toward reevaluating - and redefining - traditional relationships within the criminal justice community and with neighborhood residents.

### **Background**

The number of offenders on probation nearly quadrupled between 1980 and 2000, to 3.84 million. Expenditures for probation and parole during this period, however, did not increase proportionately, placing extraordinary stress on state and local agencies responsible for supervising probationers. In Boston, and elsewhere, caseloads sometimes exceeded 150 probationers for each officer, making it difficult, if not impossible, for officers to develop relationships with their charges.

As levels of violence increased over recent decades, probation officers ventured less frequently into the community and conducted more of their work in the office and by telephone, further reducing their effectiveness. These conditions left offenders virtually unsupervised and provided them with little incentive to comply with the terms of their probation. Not surprisingly, active probationers comprise 16% of all felony arrests.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the obvious public safety implications of community supervision, police and probation officers have historically kept each other at arms length. Each brings to the table different statutory mandates and professional training. Probation officers have broad authority to stop and question offenders and immediately revoke their probation if they violate its requirements. Police powers are more circumscribed, but police do have more extensive training in public safety techniques. In a balkanized criminal justice system, however, the advantages of combining forces rarely received attention.

### **How Does Operation Night Light Work?**

Operation Night Light began in 1992 as an informal collaboration between probation officers in the Dorchester, MA, District Court and police officers in Boston's Anti-Gang Violence Unit. The partnership was initiated almost out of desperation at a time when Boston was experiencing a surge in gang violence, a rise in juvenile homicide victims, growing public alarm, and increasingly bold behavior of gang members in courthouses. Curfews were not commonly imposed by the court and were difficult to enforce, since probation officers typically worked 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and police officers on the night shift had no way of knowing who was on probation and limited authority to intervene even when they observed probation violations.

Operation Night Light initially paired one probation officer with two police officers along as back up to make surprise visits to the homes, schools, and worksites of high-risk youth probationers during the nontraditional hours of 7 p.m. to midnight.

Operation Night Light, and other similar programs, focus their limited resources on high-risk offenders, the relatively small percentage of probationers who pose a threat to public safety. Care is taken to avoid heavy-handed tactics, or what is known as a "tail 'em, nail 'em, jail 'em" approach. According to Harold B. Wooten, the co-author and former Project Director for Operation Spotlight, a police/probation partnership program in Maryland, "citizens want safe communities, but they also want to see officers giving a hand up to offenders, some of whom are family members."

According to Bill Stewart, Assistant Chief Probation Officer of the Dorchester District Court, and one of the founders of Operation Night Light, "we now know that one percent of the teenage population was holding the other 99 percent hostage." Making evening visits to offenders' homes sent the message that the system was serious, and it provided a powerful foil to the peer pressure to break curfew many probationers felt under the old system, when there was little chance of being caught.

### **The State of Play**

In Boston today, 50 police officers and 50 probation officers ride the streets together seven nights a week. All new probation officers must commit to spending at least 20% of their time in the community during non-traditional hours.<sup>3</sup> Operation Night Light is now part of a larger community policing program aimed at addressing public safety issues across the board.

Though the spread of these programs is not officially tracked, observers believe that more than 20 jurisdictions around the country have instituted some form of police/probation partnership, including Operation Spotlight in Maryland, and programs in Washington, DC, Minneapolis, MN, Maricopa County, AZ, Vancouver, WA, New Haven, CT, and Clark County, OR. In Texas, a similar program called Project Spotlight serves seven counties with large populations. Many other jurisdictions are considering police/probation partnership programs.

While each program has a slightly different focus, geared to their specific circumstances, probation expert Harold Wooten has identified several fundamental elements of a police/probation initiative:

- Team members should always include probation and police officers and may also include community based organizations or advocates and representatives from other relevant agencies, such as HUD, treatment centers, etc.
- The involved agencies should “share case specific information about offenders such as: name, address, photo, identifying features, phone number, vehicle tag number prior record of weapons possessions, co-defendants, record of violence, modus operandi, conditions of release in the community.”
- Police should report all suspicious activities they observe about offenders to probation team members.
- Team members must be able to quickly share information electronically. In addition, teams should meet weekly to exchange information.
- Local citizens should be considered assets, and have methods by which they can report alleged criminal conduct to probation/police teams in their community.
- Team members should establish a “tone” with offenders that is firm, factual, and friendly.
- The courts must be responsive to the actions of the teams.

### **Do Police/Probation Partnerships Make a Difference?**

After a broad violence-reduction strategy was adopted in Boston, of which Operation Night Light became a part, homicides, which reached a high of 152 in 1990, dropped to 31 in 1999.<sup>4</sup> Juvenile homicides dropped from a high of 16 in 1990, to zero in 1997. In addition, the rate of curfew compliance among juveniles more than doubled to 70% over the same period. No independent evaluations of the impact of Operation Night Light or its offspring have yet been completed, but participants, many of whom were initially skeptical, believe that police/probation partnerships are a primary contributor to reduced crime rates and improved rates of probation compliance.

A 1999 report by the National Institute of Justice highlighted a number of potential benefits of police/probation partnerships:<sup>5</sup>

- Partnerships may improve public safety by “allowing participating agencies to use the powers of their line staff in complementary ways”;
- Improved information sharing may help police investigate and solve crimes and provide probation officers with information about probationers’ associates;
- Staff morale may be improved by “breaking down old patterns of mistrust, correcting misinformation, and encouraging staff flexibility and creativity...”
- Partnerships may “coordinate the activities of different public and private agencies” and improve the delivery of social services.
- Partnerships may generate positive media attention for all agencies involved

### **Challenges**

The 1999 NIJ report outlined a number of challenges to starting and maintaining police/probation partnerships<sup>6</sup>:

- **Overcoming mistrust, misinformation, and stereotypes.** Partnering agencies may need to “overcome a history of antagonism and even hostility,” through dialogue.
- **Removing barriers to information sharing.** Privacy concerns and the need for tactical secrecy have presented legitimate barriers to information sharing. In some cases, existing laws and regulations relating to confidentiality may need to be examined.

The NIJ report also raised several concerns about police/probation partnerships. These partnerships “may blur the traditional distinctions in the powers or roles of the staff of the partnering agencies.”<sup>7</sup> The report also warns that few studies have been conducted about the effectiveness of these partnerships or their effects on costs.

Wooten also warns that police/probation partnerships will be ephemeral unless more effort – and funding – is provided for training both at the line and upper management levels.

### **To Learn More: Available Resources**

- *Public Safety, Crime Reduction, and Crime Prevention: Officers Get it, Will Managers Follow?*, Wooten, Harold B., Corrections Management Quarterly, Vol. 4, Issue 2, Spring 2000, p. 34-40.
- The Boston Strategy to Prevent Youth Violence, [http://www.bostonstrategy.com/programs/12\\_OpNiteLite.html](http://www.bostonstrategy.com/programs/12_OpNiteLite.html).
- *Proactive Community Supervision: A Plan for Making Maryland Communities Safer*, October 2000, A Report to the Budget Committee of the Maryland General Assembly, <http://www.dpscs.state.md.us./pnp/pppcs.pdf>.
- Probation and Parole Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pandp.htm>.
- “Broken Windows” Probation: *The Next Step in Fighting Crime*, Manhattan Institute, Aug 1999, [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/cr\\_07.pdf](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/cr_07.pdf).
- American Probation and Parole Association, <http://www.appa-net.org>.
- *Police-Corrections Partnerships*, National Institute of Justice, <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/175047.pdf>
- Project Spotlight, Texas, <http://www.spotlight.swt.edu/default.html>

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<sup>1</sup> Probation and Parole Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pandp.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Felony Defendants in Large Urban Counties, 1998, OJP, BJS, November 2001, p. 8. <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/fdluc98.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The Boston Strategy to Prevent Youth Violence, [http://www.bostonstrategy.com/programs/12\\_OpNiteLite.html](http://www.bostonstrategy.com/programs/12_OpNiteLite.html).

<sup>4</sup> Dorchester Juvenile Court.

<sup>5</sup> *Police-Corrections Partnerships*, National Institute of Justice, 1999, p. 8., <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/175047.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 2.