

Innovative Approaches to Drug Control:

An Evaluation of Mississippi's Multi-Jurisdictional Drug Task Force Program

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After 30 years of a national war on drugs a victory remains elusive.

Despite increasingly punitive policies toward drug offenders, drug related crime continues to grow and sap valuable CJ resources.

The 2000 UCR estimated that there were over 1.5 million state and local arrests for drug abuse violations, which is an increase of nearly 500,000 arrests from 1990.

Drug abuse violations were the largest offense category for all arrests made in 2000.

Long though to be associated with urban plight, problems with drug abuse would not appear at first glance in a state such as MS.

Historically, MS has been one of the most rural states in the country.

Even today only 11 of the 82 counties in MS are located in metropolitan areas.

Just 1/3 of MS residents live in these areas...

MS's cultural makeup has been strongly conservative, religiously fundamentalist, and severely strict with regard to crime control.

But, drug use and distribution is becoming an increasingly large part of MS's crime scene.

In 2000 MS had 11,368 drug abuse arrests, accounting for 10% of all arrests made.

The arrest rate for drugs in 2000 was a 100% increase from 1995.

MS has characteristics observed in areas with drug problems.

MS has high levels of poverty, illiteracy, high school dropouts, and teen unemployment.

Between 1999 and 2001 MS had on average nearly 17% of its residents living below the poverty level.

This is above the national level of 11%.

Economic prosperity came to MS in the form of casinos.

Rapid economic growth related to the casino boom created a 'boomtown' effect...drugs were one added bonus.

The rural nature of MS has made geographically remote areas perfect for drug trafficking and abuse.

Producing drugs such as meth and crack is easy in a rural environment.

MS's Multi-Jurisdictional Drug Task Force Program

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 became law on November 18, 1988.

This law established a grant program for the purpose of implementing drug control and system improvement initiatives at state and national levels.

The formula grant was to assist states and units of local governments in developing and implementing drug control projects that improve the workings of the CJ system, particularly with regard to drug control.

MS's MJDTF's are formed by state and local units of government combining resources to control drug trafficking and abuse.

Each participating local law enforcement agency contributes personnel and other resources to coordinate the drug control effort.

Street drug sales in urban areas of the state are targets of urban and metropolitan narcotics units.

Another goal of this program was to improve the public's perception of drug enforcement efforts in the community.

One of the stipulations of receiving federal support from this grant program is that funded projects must include an evaluation component.

Evaluation Design

An outcome evaluation or impact assessment was employed.

This type of evaluation is conducted in order to assess whether the program's services and activities elicit their desired effects.

The 2 primary research questions were

1. to what extent is the drug task force meeting its goals
2. do the data reflect substantial progress toward the stated objectives?

MJDTF Arrest Disposition Analysis

The Sample

Randomly sampled 4 jurisdictions

The units were selected from a pool of units that had been operating at least 5 years.

Each task force was contacted and told of our need to review their records.

Our method was to randomly select 50 files per year beginning in 1993 and ending in 1997.

If 50 cases had not been processed in the area then all records were reviewed.

A total of 455 records were reviewed

Sample Characteristics

Majority of arrests were for males...87.6%

Blacks were disproportionately represented...73%

Whites...24%

Mean level of education was 11.29 years

52% were unemployed

Performance Results

Examined performance measures including

1. arrests leading to prosecution by type of offense
2. arrests leading to conviction by offense type
3. felony versus misdemeanor offenses
4. disposition of cases as probation or community release
5. disposition of cases by incarceration
6. sentence length
7. repeat offender arrests

Conviction and Disposition Findings

Vast majority of cases led to prosecution and conviction

Only about 10% of the cases were not prosecuted.

3.5% ended in acquittal

95.5% ended in conviction

MJDTF Focus Group Analysis

The final portion of the evaluation summarizes information gathered from focus groups of personnel representing the 4 selected task forces in MS.

These 4 sites represented each of 4 geographic regions in the state: North MS, East MS, South MS, and West MS.

These regions include both rural and urban areas

The 4 task forces consented to audiotapes focus groups with both administrators and agents.

Focus groups ranged from 4 to 10 task force members and typically lasted between 90 and 120 minutes.

The interviewers were guided by a general question list developed after reviewing the Bureau of Justice Assistance report "Multi-Jurisdictional Task Forces: Ten Years of Research and Evaluation"

According to this report critical elements for successful task forces include

1. written interagency agreements and advisory boards
2. prosecutor involvement
3. computerized information databases and systems
4. target decision, case planning, and enhanced investigation tactics
5. communication among task force participation
6. coordination of activities
7. budgeting
8. formulation of goals, objectives, and performance measures
9. monitoring and evaluation
10. staffing and recruitment
11. effective seizure and forfeiture activities
12. development of effective training and technical assistance

The first section of the questionnaire sought to acquire information about the general work carried or in the task force.

The second part of our interview guide brought in several of the critical elements described above, in particular elements 5, 6, 10, 11, and 12.

Communication With Other Drug Task Forces and Units

Any given task force is usually not well informed as to activities and objectives of other task forces around the state...

On average there is little communication between task forces.

This is viewed as a liability by most task force members.

No good communication with the MS Bureau of Narcotics

Communication between task forces is heavily influenced by personalities and task force agents have had unsatisfactory experiences with MBN in the past.

Recruitment and Training

High turnover rate within many of the task forces

Job can be difficult and dangerous and there are few incentives to personnel to remain in the task force

Conclusion

Our analysis found that the overwhelming majority of cases brought by task forces led to convictions.

The lack of standardized case files and the amount of missing information in case files make assessing the impact of MJDTF's across the state difficult.