

MAN'S INHUMANITY TO MAN as personified in the crime of robbery is seldom equaled in the seemingly endless lexicon of criminal activity. Few other crimes, with the exception perhaps of murder and rape, so thoroughly traumatize—physically and mentally—the victim as does robbery. Since the parameters of robbery often include rape and even murder, robbery must be considered the most vicious of crimes.

Robbery takes on many variations of its central theme. It ranges from the armed assault, which all too often ends in homicide, to the mere grab and run of the "purse snatcher." No matter what the individual circumstances, the victim is left not only without something of value, usually money, but with a sense of abject vulnerability which causes him to be apprehensive and frightened. His feeling of helplessness often leads to withdrawal from normal activity and to fears of further victimization.

Of all the crimes of robbery, those committed on the public streets and byways probably result in fulfilling the above description best. So-called "street crimes" of robbery are one of the major reasons for the flight from the inner cities of those persons who feel most threatened, have the resources and lack the racial inhibitions for residential mobility.

It was the realization of the actual and psychological impact of "street robbery" that led Commissioner John Nichols to order his command staff to examine what appeared to him to have become a problem of epidemic proportions in Detroit. In 1970 there were some 23,038 robberies in Detroit; of this number, 17,888 occurred on the streets of the city. Eighty-five citizens had been slain while being victimized by the robbers. Untold thousands more were injured during the commission of the crimes. The casualties ranged from broken bones to injuries so severe that the victims were permanently disabled. Some were confined to hospital beds and wheelchairs for the rest of their lives. Some languished just long enough not to constitute murder (a year and a day).

It was made emphatically clear at a staff meeting that entirely legitimate pleas that little could be done about this type of crime using ordinary police methods would not suffice. It had been resolved to somehow reduce the violence and bloodshed attendant to street robbery. The only stipulation in the mandate was that whatever solutions were proposed be effective and selective as well as legally and morally proper.

# S.T.R.E.S.S.:

## Zero Vis

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# bility Policing

In order to attempt to properly approach the problem, selected executives began collecting computer data and individual case histories of a random sample of robberies throughout the city. It soon became possible to establish a somewhat valid profile of the typical robbery victim—and to a lesser extent, the perpetrators. This, briefly, was the victim's profile: He was typically middle-aged or older. There were twice as many male victims as female victims. The victim usually lived in or near the neighborhood in which the robbery took place, and in three-quarters of the cases he was black.

A comparative profile of the perpetrator indicated that he was typically young, 17 to 29, and nonwhite. In 8,718 cases he was armed with a handgun; in 462 with a shotgun or rifle; in 7,009 cases he used bodily force; and in the balance of cases a wide variety of weapons was employed.

To gain some insight into the problem, we reviewed our computer printouts on locations and made field inspections of the areas. In addition, we scrutinized a large number of actual reports in depth. It soon became obvious that in the vast majority of the cases the crimes were not, as one would expect, being committed covertly. Rather, they were blatantly carried out in full view of other citizens on the street.

In this phenomenon was seen a possible approach to the problem which would capitalize on the fact that the criminal felt relatively safe in carrying out the act in the presence of other citizens. He apparently had become persuaded that large segments of the community were either so apathetic or intimidated that they would not interfere. Thus his only concern was to

assure himself that no uniformed police were in the area.

All of these factors, coupled with the pre-existing bias of one of the staff which caused him to be enamored with the efficacy of surveillance and plainclothes operations, led to a proposal being submitted and, after several rather minor refinements, being approved by Commissioner Nichols.

The proposal essentially could be described as "zero visibility patrol." It was to encompass a wide variety of well-known police patrol techniques along with more unique innovations. The keystone of the entire plan was to be innovative and initiative on the part of the officers to be assigned.

A typical tour of duty would see the assigned personnel on foot patrol in teams of two or three men or women. They would be accompanied by mobile patrols in unmarked patrol cars, taxicabs, delivery trucks, campers, bicycles or kiddie cars, as appropriate. It was also envisioned that, depending on the characteristics of each individual pattern, the officers would disguise themselves and act as decoys.

The heart of the concept, which remained to be named, was to be the analysis of robberies which would be done by CID officers of the Robbery Section who would be assigned to the unit. This analysis entailed each report of robbery throughout the city being immediately transmitted to headquarters. These reports would then be studied to learn the age, race, sex and other personal data of both victim and perpetrator, with special emphasis on direction, method and style of attack.

It became clear that the computer—so valuable in assigning patrol units and analyzing overall crime patterns—was not going to give the definitive detail needed for our analysis. We needed specific locations, not scout car

territories or census tracts. We needed extremely detailed information on victim and perpetrator. The result was a return to the now archaic method of colored pins on maps. The maps were broken down by precincts, with various colored pins representing different time frames and so on.

As patterns emerged as to time of attack, method, location, description of perpetrators and victims, men would be assigned to those areas at the appropriate times.

At this time District Inspector Gordon Smith, who was to co-command the new unit, suggested the acronym *STRESS—Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets*.

With the basic concept well in hand, a target date was selected for the unit to become operational by February 15, 1971—a tight timetable to be sure.

An administrative decision was then made to use the existing uniformed patrol unit known as Precinct Support Unit. This is a highly competent and efficient tactical unit which had been in operation for seven years. This unit would become a core of experienced officers, to which would be added young officers not long out of the academy. This would give balance, it was thought.

An intensive training period was begun while the appropriate equipment was being assembled and the marked cars repainted. Fortunately, some communications equipment became available under a Safe Streets Act federal grant.

The training emphasized thorough review of the state law, particularly on the issue of entrapment, search and seizure, use of force. Further training included surveillance techniques and covert methods of patrol.

To defend against allegations of entrapment, the officers assuming the decoy configuration would not be allowed to wear expensive clothes or jewelry or to carry large sums of money. The officers were instructed to allow the criminal acts to be completed—both for their own safety and to avoid the latent ambiguity of inchoate crimes.

Meanwhile, the procurement campaign to obtain clothing, wigs, vehicles and other items needed was proceeding. The business community, with the cooperation of the Board of Commerce, came through admirably with those items needed as well as with the loan of trucks, taxis and various vehicles. This public-spiritedness was even more remarkable, since the donations were made with no questions asked as to the use of the material.

A few days prior to the actual inauguration of the operation, full dis-



closure was made to the mass media. This was done consciously, out of the conviction of Commissioner Nichols that one of the main advantages to come from STRESS might well be the imparting to the criminal the doubt that his next victim may not be the helpless old lady or drunk, as the criminal may have first assumed.

Additionally, it was believed that such frank disclosure would alleviate the spontaneous reactions of certain persons who see the removal of uniforms from policemen as a further move toward "big brotherism" or "police state"—a hope in vain, as it turned out, since strident cries of "fascism" still flourished in the radical press.

Almost immediately the STRESS operation began to make arrests relevant to those street crimes that it was designed to function against. The birth of the operation was not without the usual labor pains we accept as a normal part of the start of any new unit.

The anguish of some of the problems did have their comic relief, however. On the first night of operations, Commissioner Nichols, Superintendent Charles Gentry and Assistant Superintendent Anthony Bertoni met with the men to wish them well. Those men who had been dressed up as ladies, through the kindness of the businessmen of the city, were extremely nervous over meeting those executives, some for the first time, "in drag."

At the end of the shift there was a delegation sent to the co-commanders with a complaint. The mini-skirted spokesman said, "Inspector, no one tried to rob us, but we got six lewd proposals." After the laughter died down, we saw that the men did look attractive and probably were being perceived as prostitutes, rather than innocent victims.

As the men became more accustomed to their new job, the arrests mounted. It was noted that the officers were making many arrests for robbery, burglary, car theft and even rape, murder and arson while in the "decoy" phase of the operation. This was apparently because they had successfully assumed the appearance of the citizens of the neighborhoods in which they worked.

Several of our men were robbed by thugs. Each time this occurred the event was given wide publicity in order to obtain the maximum psychological advantage. Reporters were encouraged to write in-depth articles and were given open access to the operation. Television documentaries were produced and shown.

One of the unfortunate results of this frank and unselfconscious seeking

of publicity was the emphasis placed by the media on the decoy phase of the STRESS operation. This dramatic activity, which saw officers constantly exposing themselves to physical danger and death at the hands of individuals whose patterns indicated they would not hesitate to resort to violence, caught the public's imagination.

Predictably, the encounters with holdup men, who found that instead of a helpless victim they had actually selected a brave and highly competent police officer, led to violence. In the first eight months of operations, eight felons were slain by STRESS officers. Seven died while attempting to shoot it out with officers, or while in flight after robbing them. One was killed while attempting to shoot responding officers with a shotgun, when a STRESS crew "backed up" a uniformed car to a family disturbance.

Thirty-eight STRESS officers were shot, cut or assaulted; fortunately, none was seriously injured.

Then, on August 26, 1971, a young black officer who had volunteered for STRESS was shot to death when he and his partner interdicted a robbery of a narcotic pad. For five days all other STRESS operations came to a halt while a maximum effort was made to identify and apprehend his killers. This effort culminated in the arrest and charging of two men and a girl. The identification and arrest were made by the patrolman's brother officers from STRESS.

On June 15 a series of events had occurred which was to trigger a major controversy over STRESS. For the first time since its inception, a STRESS crew was assigned to a specific area based on citizen requests. These citizens lived in the vicinity of a neighborhood center which housed social activities, a methadone center and recreation activities. According to the complaint, the visitors to this facility were preying on residents of the area. These residents were predominantly black citizens, but significant numbers of whites still lived on adjacent streets. The main thoroughfare of Detroit was one block away. An examination of reports which had been received revealed more than one distinct pattern, indicating multiple assailants.

When the STRESS crews first worked the area in June, they were immediately successful in apprehending several persons for "purse snatching" and robbery. The problem seemed to be alleviated and the area was left alone.

In August the robberies began again and the STRESS crew returned to the area. At 9:20 p.m. on September 17

an officer, in company with his three cover officers, went into the neighborhood. In response to the pattern of offenses, the target officer took on the appearance of a stranded motorist who had been partying. He carried a gas can and appeared to have been drinking.

As he approached the Center, he was set upon by two black men who had been loitering on the steps. Two of his cover officers were behind him about one block away, which was as close as they could get, due to the terrain. The third cover officer, who was driving a taxi, had gotten out of position and had to circle the block because he was on a one-way street.

The assailants knocked the target officer to the ground, after striking him in the stomach with a metal rod. After knocking him down, they attempted to get his wallet. Finally, one of them jerked his watch off. He identified himself as a police officer, at which time they fled, going in opposite directions. After repeated warnings for them to halt, he fired his service revolver and both subjects fell.

When covering officers arrived, they conveyed the two subjects to the City hospital, where both were pronounced dead.

A young enterprising reporter for one of the two local papers went to the Center and listened to what was purported to be eyewitness accounts of the robbery and shooting. He reported these highly inflammatory accounts as though they were in fact true, without even a cursory investigation.

Central to the issue which arose from this incident was the concern of the community over the fact that the target officer was a survivor of a shoot-out in which his partner was killed by members of a black nationalist organization. At the subsequent trial the assailants—who were arrested in a church shortly after the killing—were found not guilty. Many elements of the community unjustifiably and emotionally accused the officer of exacting retribution for the death of his partner by killing the two youths. Much of the rancor surfaced and, in effect, crystallized the thinking of most Detroiters by splitting the community into "anti or pro" STRESS elements, which crossed color and economic lines. The administration recognized the need for strong and aggressive support of the program and stood firm in the face of this vociferous and often demonstrative criticism.

Another major concern in this incident lay in the fact that the victims were youths in their early teens. One can almost universally predict the first

two questions a police commander will ask on being notified in the middle of the night and told one of his officers has fatally shot a criminal. The first: "How is the officer?" "Is he all right?" The second: "How old was the thief?"

So pervasive is the equation of criminal responsibility with chronological age in the United States that police everywhere recognize that an event guaranteed to create a shockwave of protest is the shooting of a legally (and often artificially) defined juvenile regardless of the heinousness of the act which he has committed. Nowhere is there full realization that age does not enter into the elements of statutes defining the parameters in the use of fatal force.

Commissioner Nichols saw the attack on STRESS as more than the issue of shooting two youths. He quite accurately analyzed the assault as directed at the issue of whether we could police black communities.

The administration took the position of defending the concept, but allowed the specific issue of the patrolman's shooting of the two youths to go unanswered, pending the outcome of a departmental Board of Inquiry (routine for all police shootings) and the independent investigations of the Wayne County Prosecutor's office.

We believed that the arguments for STRESS as a concept were cogent and persuasive. Statistically, STRESS was unassailable in terms of its effectiveness. In slightly under 11 months of full operations, it has compiled an impressive record which includes over 800 felony arrests and prosecutions. Charges range from murder, rape and robbery to larceny by trick. In addition, the officers have arrested and charged over 300 persons with misdemeanors ranging from unregistered guns to state traffic offenses. Added to this figure are 190 juveniles apprehended on charges which, if committed by adults, would have been felonies. Hundreds more have been cited for city ordinance violations, traffic violations and miscellaneous other offenses. Six hundred and seventy-one guns were confiscated, 581 of which were handguns.

A strange and inexplicable phenomenon began to develop. While we read headlines in local newspapers such as "STRESS Under Attack" and "STRESS Must Go," a deluge of mail began to come into the Commissioner's office. Senior members of his staff, who had survived literally hundreds of crises in the past, said they had never seen such an influx of mail, telegrams and phone calls. A content analysis of the mail found it to be overwhelm-

ingly in favor of STRESS—probably 5,000 pieces altogether. Significantly, out of the total public response, fewer than a dozen items were anti-STRESS.

Interestingly enough, a sizeable proportion—if not the majority of the respondents—were black people. Many of them had been victims of street crimes themselves. Surprisingly, few letters were blatantly racist in nature. Commissioner Nichols personally answered each letter or postcard which was signed.

It was obvious that the media—or some of its representatives—were either talking about a different issue or were writing in response to their own editorial bias. This became almost ludicrous when the editorial page of one paper attacked STRESS as racist, immoral and unethical while making various other implications of negative police-community relations; yet on the same page, for several succeeding days, letters to the editor were almost completely in favor of STRESS.

The publicity has had several interesting effects. One of them was the appearance of a variety of bumper stickers and lapel buttons with slogans like "Support STRESS" or "We Need STRESS." Also, citizens and officers have been asked by persons about to rob them if they were STRESS officers. When they replied that they were not, the robbery took place.

One statistic not previously mentioned is the robbery figure for 1971. Robberies showed a decrease of 9.9 percent for the year. Only two months had increased over 1970. January had a 15.7 percent increase and July had a 2.1 percent increase. This decline was the first such downturn in a decade. The co-commanders of STRESS had to be restrained from congratulating themselves and their unit, simply because there is no objective way to prove conclusively that STRESS was responsible for some or all of the decrease.

The most sobering fact is the increasing recognition of the high correlation in terms of cause and effect between street robbery and narcotic (heroin) addiction. If one needed any more proof of this, then it is abundantly clear that it would only be necessary to examine the patterns of robbery which indicate that most street robberies are occurring in the near proximity of narcotic suppliers.

This high correlation of robberies and heroin tempers grandiose claims of credit to any individual unit, since at about the time of the inauguration of STRESS the Commissioner also began a massive enforcement effort against heroin traffic. This included the quad-

rupling of the central narcotic unit, the establishment of precinct narcotic units and the involvement of the entire department in narcotic enforcement.

One must view the robbery downturn, then, as the result of a systems approach to the problem and refrain from making claims for any specific approach which cannot be objectively evaluated.

We have written this article not to describe a new technique, nor to celebrate or idealize any particular law enforcement approach. Rather, our intention has been to identify a phenomenon that many of us fail to recognize because of our day-to-day involvement in crisis management. That is, there are no spokesmen for the black community because there is no single black community, but rather many communities who share only a common racial heritage. Second, the black people of large urban areas recognize that they are the chief victims of black crime and they want something done about it. They, as do police administrators, regret the taking of human life, but accept the public statement made by Commissioner Nichols: "The robber names the game. He can quit robbing, or if he doesn't he can surrender when called upon to do so by a policeman."

Black people are adamant in their commitment to support firm but fair law enforcement which is designed explicitly to give them the level of protection to which they are entitled. They will not mindlessly follow so-called leaders who persist in vociferously attacking police for any effective measures they adopt. Not only will they not follow such leadership, but they themselves will lead the way in support of legitimate police functions. This was dramatically demonstrated a few weeks ago when 500 residents of an all-black neighborhood turned out to cheer a narcotic crew as they raided a narcotic pad.

Again in reference to STRESS, a white STRESS officer was approached by a black man who asked, "You got any money?" The officer's nerves bunched as he prepared to respond to the assault he believed was coming. He replied "no." The man then reached into his pocket. The officer tensed even more. The man pulled out a dollar and said, "Here, take this, you shouldn't walk around here—it's a bad area."

With citizen response and concern, as demonstrated above, and units like STRESS, perhaps we are beginning to see a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. At least we know that both police and community aspire to the same goals. ★